

Harry Potter and Salazar's Talisman

Chapter One

The Protégé Returns

Harry Potter entered the front door of Hogwarts and stopped in his tracks. It had been 7 years since he had been in this hall. The feelings which crept up on him varied. The most prominent feeling was relief. Harry's years after graduation, or rather after he had awoken from the magical coma he'd been in after killing Voldemort, had been trying.

The Death Eater trials had taken a lot of his time. Although Harry could not actually testify from first hand knowledge on many Death Eaters (Harry had only had to deal with Voldemort's elite) the Ministry seemed to want Harry ever present at the trials.

Then to Harry's dismay, they sent him abroad on a sort of good-will mission. Harry had considered the tour another nightmare as he had been inundated with the media and forced to suffer through public appearances. While Sirius and his ever-present love interest, Gwenn, were there to support him, Remus had been his savior. Harry had hired Remus as his Public Relations representative ("I'm Famous Harry Bloody Potter. I can damn well hire a werewolf if I want to.") and he took the role very seriously. Protector of Harry's sanity, Remus learned to judge when Harry was over-extended, exhausted or just fed up. So Harry had coped.

Harry's only frustration during these years was his love life or, rather, lack-there-of. Harry and Ginger's break-up (she didn't get over Harry's choice at the end of Harry's 7th year, when he had chosen to become the Balance of Power) had been the scandal of the decade. The media had gone berserk with it. Ginger put up with the public outcry and took the Howlers in stride and went on with her life.

Harry, not being able to take the pity as well as the following matchmaking (everyone now also considered him the world's most eligible bachelor), extended his time abroad to include a visit (finally) to his manor in Bulgaria. The estate Voldemort had given him his 7th year was not large by medieval standards but it was impressive.

Harry had secured a caretaker/trustee to oversee care of the property and since it was co-deeded to Harry's alias, Jack Taylor, Harry was totally anonymous there.

Harry's attempts at dating though were sad. No one could see passed his fame. The few who did get to know 'Just Harry,' the sarcastic, cynical pessimist who had incidentally saved the world because he could make an evil dark lord laugh, couldn't take the media pressure.

It wasn't until Ron and Hermione's wedding that Harry realized that Ginger was the only one for him, the only one who had been able to deal with everything. She always knew 'Just Harry.' She was the one who always fixed him. Rowan, Harry's phoenix, of course, had been telling him that, via song, for years.

Harry had thought getting her back would be difficult. Although Harry regretted losing his temper in the middle of the wedding reception, it did achieve the desired results as well as providing entertainment for those attending.

Ginger had been dancing, too closely in Harry's opinion, with Seamus, who Harry knew had always had a thing for Ginger. Harry had marched directly out to the middle of the dance floor and pulled the couple apart. When the exchange got a little heated, the bottom line question had come out. Why had Harry left Ginger behind? It seemed to be the basis behind all of Ginger's anger. That Harry hadn't loved, trusted her enough to take her with him.

But Harry had known that she wouldn't have been able to deal with the fact that Harry had to sacrifice himself. No one expected Harry to live, especially Harry. The fact that he had lived, that he had been there at all arguing that point was almost comical.

Ginger still wouldn't accept it.

"It's more than that, Harry," Ginger had railed at him. "I know it is. Just tell me the truth."

And Harry couldn't help himself. As if forced out of him, the words came out.

“If you were there, I wouldn’t have been able to do it,” said Harry. “I had everything I could possibly want at the time. Everyone with me was safe – protected. If you were there, I would have had no reason to do anything to stop him. I would have been completely happy.”

Ginger had blinked at him. “What’s wrong with being happy?”

“I couldn’t be happy at the expense of others, Ging,” Harry had told her, echoing the same words he told Voldemort. “But if you were with me, I would have.” Harry had taken her hands then. “I saved the world because you were still in it. I did it for you.”

They were married a little over a year later. Not soon enough for Harry but Mrs. Weasley, Sirius and Gwenn and even Remus insisted that Harry had to be married ‘fittingly.’ So Harry concentrated on building their new house on his land in Godric’s Hollow and on finally going back to school.

School seemed to be more like a duty. While Harry didn’t need any more formal training in magic, he did take an extensive amount of classes on teaching. If he was going to do it, he wanted to do it right.

So, married and degreed, Harry finally received notification that Hogwarts was in need of a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher if Harry wished to apply, which he did.

And there he was. Harry looked around. The foyer was dark and silent – it was the middle of the night. He had missed the opening feast but he hadn’t wanted to leave Ginger, who was now pregnant with the first of their children. She hadn’t been feeling well and Harry had refused to leave her.

Harry moved through the school until he came to face the gargoyle, which guarded Dumbledore’s office. Harry raised a hand and the gargoyle jumped aside.

Since Harry was one of the most powerful wizards in the world, he could do that.

“Sorry,” said Harry. “I have to see the Headmaster though.”

Harry moved through the office and up the moving spiral staircase. He knocked on the door to Dumbledore's inner office.

"I'm assuming that is you, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Please come in."

Harry poked his head around the door. "I'm sorry, Professor," said Harry. "I couldn't leave Ginger."

"Hermione told me, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I understand but I was disappointed that I couldn't introduce the students to their new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor."

Harry looked at the floor. "I'm sorry, Professor."

Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix, noticed him and flew to him. Harry stroked him.

Dumbledore sighed. "Harry, after everything you've been through, why do you insist on apologizing all the time?"

"I'm sor-" Harry cut himself off and looked at Dumbledore with a grin. "Can't seem to break the habit of a lifetime," said Harry.

Dumbledore peered back at him through his half-moon glasses, his eyes shining with humor. "I suppose not."

"I just wanted to let you know I was here," said Harry. "Where should I go?"

"Your private room is just off your office, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Settle in and I'll send you're schedule up to you in the morning."

"Yes, sir," said Harry. "Thanks."

"Harry."

"Yes, Professor?" Harry turned to him.

"My name is Albus. You are permitted to use it now."

"That'll take getting used to," said Harry.

Dumbledore smiled. "Run along now. Busy day tomorrow."

Harry stood outside his classroom feeling so nervous he could have thrown up. Hermione was staring at him. Hermione was teaching Arithmancy, as she had planned and had been at Hogwarts since before she and Ron had married.

Harry could tell by Hermione's expression that she thought Harry was being stupid.

"Just be yourself, Harry," said Hermione. "You'll be fine."

"Easy for you to say," muttered Harry.

"Oh go on, Harry," said Hermione and she kissed Harry's cheek, which always made Harry feel better.

Harry nodded and strode into his classroom. His first class was waiting for him. Harry went to his desk at the front of the room and picked up the register. He turned to face the class. They all looked back.

In a quiet but clear voice, Harry took the roll, trying to match names with faces. When he put the list back down and turned back to the class, they stared back expectantly.

Just be yourself. Harry gave himself a mental shake and sat on top of his desk. "So you are 6 years?" said Harry

"Yes, Sir," said one student.

"You'll have to excuse me," said Harry. "I'm a little nervous."

"*You*, Sir?"

"Yes," confessed Harry, looking to the red-headed boy. He glanced at the log. "Sean McIves, is it?"

The boy straightened in his seat. He appeared tall with an athletic build. "Yes, Professor," said Sean.

"Well," Harry told the class. "This is my first official class. I've never been any good at public speaking. I can face death without breaking a sweat but speaking in front of large crowds of people makes me nauseous."

A few students choked as they tried to suppress their laughter. Harry grinned at them and the rest of the class laughed softly and relaxed. The class's reaction had the effect Harry needed. He relaxed too and looked at the roll again.

"Miss Larsen," called on a student with glasses and thick brown hair who had a book open and was scribbling on parchment already. She reminded Harry of Hermione.

"Yes, Professor?"

"What did you cover last year?"

"We learned a lot of counter curses," said Cindy Larsen, her blue eyes sharp behind the thick glasses. "Our last teacher was a bit of a fanatic about them."

"I don't know Professor Narra personally," said Harry. "But I'm sure the curses would come in handy. What else?"

"We touched briefly on You-Know-Who's first rise—"

"Whoa," said Harry, holding up his hands. "Back up. I will not hear that particular wizard called You-Know-Who, *Him* or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. I for one can think of a lot of things to call him, and most of them aren't very nice, but in my classroom you will refer to him by name." Harry looked around the class to stress his point. "Now I want to hear you all say it."

As the class mumbled Voldemort's name, Harry had to smile.

"Wasn't so hard, was it?"

Most of the class grinned back at him.

"What was he like, Professor?"

Harry wasn't sure which student had thrown out that question but the rest of the class started murmuring as if they all had that question on their minds.

Harry had expected it to come up, but he had hoped it wouldn't be in his first class on his first day. The class looked back at him breathless and hopeful. He glanced down at the register. No wonder. Gryffindors.

"All right, then," said Harry. "Let's get it over with. What would you like to know?"

"Well what was he like?" said Cindy. "Personally?"

"Personally?" said Harry. He slid off the desk and began to pace thoughtfully. "Well, he was definitely brilliant. His mind worked so fast it was amazing. Whatever he did, he did with precision and detail. He always seemed to be one step ahead of everyone else as if he had planned the outcome. Which he usually claimed he did." Harry glanced at the class. "He was very vain and liked to gloat."

"Was he really so powerful?"

"Oh yes," said Harry. "Voldemort was a megalomaniac and he did succeed in acquiring vast amounts of magical power as well as power over people."

"So he could control people?"

Harry considered the question. "Some people. Many were controlled through his Death Eaters who were of course controlled by Voldemort. His Death Eaters were totally devoted to him. He demanded loyalty. He was demanding period. You did what he said, when he said it and you had better had done it to his satisfaction."

"So, was he really so vicious?" said Cindy a little breathlessly.

Harry gave a short nod and hopped back on his desk. "His merciless cruelty is legendary. He enjoyed seeing people's pain." Harry gave a cynical little laugh. "Especially mine," muttered Harry. "But he seemed to have an honorable streak because he was fair dishing it out. And I've never known him to break a fairly agreed to contract."

“His manipulation of people and his flair for semantic games made him a genius of getting him whatever he wanted.”

“He didn’t manage to get the Sorcerer’s Stone,” said Sean.

“Right,” said another student. “You stopped him.”

“And he didn’t get you,” said Cindy. “I read about it. He couldn’t kill you.”

“Well, yes,” admitted Harry. “And I must say, Voldemort wasn’t pleased with me about any of it.”

The class snickered.

“When I unfortunately saved Peter Pettigrew’s life, Voldemort had a servant to help him get his body back.”

“So it wasn’t Sirius Black who killed all those people?”

“No, it wasn’t” said Harry. “Sirius Black was my father’s best friend and he’s my godfather. Peter Pettigrew was the spy and the man who betrayed my parents.”

They asked about the Triwizard Tournament and Harry gave them a brief, carefully edited account of it.

“That’s when he murdered Cedric Diggory.”

“Actually, it was Peter who killed him, but Voldemort ordered it. Technically, Cedric should have won that Tournament but we helped each other so much through it, he insisted that I should win. He was so stubborn about it and I could hardly stand. I just wanted to get out of the maze.”

“Why couldn’t you stand?”

“The spider,” another student hissed impatiently. “Don’t interrupt.”

Harry hid a grin. “Anyway, if I had been more insistent, Cedric would have gone to the grave yard alone and died anyway but at least Voldemort wouldn’t have gotten his body back at that time.”

"That's why you felt you had to die with him," said Sean. "Because you felt it was your fault."

Harry stared at the boy and sighed. "The reasons I knew I had to die with Voldemort are many and complex," said Harry. "And maybe we'll get into them another time, but the fact is I *should* have died. I really don't know how I survived."

The bell rang and the class actually groaned as they collected their things.

Harry got off his desk and went around it to sit down behind it. "Next time we're going to go into the Unforgivable Curses. Be prepared."

"Yes, Professor," he heard many of them murmur.

Most of his classes were similar that day although none as bad as his first one. By dinner, Harry felt like he had never talked about himself so much in his life. His Gryffindor sixth years were the most curious and Voldemort had fascinated them. Harry remembered being that curious too so if telling them about his experiences helped inspire any of them, then he guessed he was doing his job.

Hermione marched into his office and slammed a book on his desk before him. Harry startled.

"Something wrong?" said Harry.

"Harry Potter, if you send another class of students into my Arithmancy room muttering what a great DADA class they had and how great Professor Potter is, I'm going to strangle you."

Harry hid his smile. "You told me to be myself. Did I know I was so captivating?"

Hermione smiled back at him and Harry knew the little performance was for his benefit. "You did," said Hermione. "Did you really order an entire class to say Voldemort?"

"Damn right I did," said Harry. "If I hear You-Know-Who again I might scream."

Hermione laughed. "Well I'm going to get something to eat and go to bed. I told you, you'd be fine."

"Thanks, Hermione," said Harry. "Good night."

She kissed his cheek. "Night Harry."

She left and Harry looked at his notes. Dumbledore had given him a free hand for his classes and Harry was thinking of doing the Unforgivable Curses the same way as Moody/Crouch had done them.

Pain exploded in Harry's head and his hand hit his scar.

Chapter 2

The Slytherin Connection

The dull burning didn't go away. Harry slowly stood up, looking around the empty classroom with a deep-rooted apprehension.

It couldn't be possible. It couldn't! But only one presence could do that to him. Had Voldemort found a way back? Even when he was whatever he was before he got his body back, Harry could feel when Voldemort was near. Is that why Harry had lived?

"Voldemort, you know you can't sneak up on me," said Harry.

Harry heard the chilling laugh and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

"Show yourself," said Harry.

"No, I don't think so, Harry," he heard Voldemort's voice. "Not yet."

Harry moved in front of his desk and leaned against it. He felt the presence move around him, his head was pounding. A ghost?

"So, Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?"

"You don't think I'm qualified?" said Harry.

Harry heard the chuckle. "Don't you think it's a little mundane after fighting the most powerful dark wizard in history?"

Harry felt the presence circle him again.

"Actually, I find it refreshing," said Harry. "At least it doesn't give me a headache."

Voldemort laughed. "Ah, Harry. I have missed you."

Harry felt the presence stop before him and flinched.

"Look at you. All grown up," said Voldemort.

The pain increased in Harry's head as if Voldemort had raised a hand to Harry face.

"I'm sorry I missed your graduation, Harry."

"I missed it too."

"Mmm, yes. You shouldn't have, Harry. I didn't want you to. I told you that."

"I remember," said Harry.

"But you insisted that you had to die to insure that I did. Your valiant sacrifice," said Voldemort and Harry felt the hand grab his chin. Harry hit his knees and stared up as the ghost of Voldemort materialized over him. "It did indeed insure my death but it also insured my immortality."

"That doesn't please you?" Harry managed through the pain. Harry stared into those red eyes. Even as a ghost they glowed.

"I haven't decided," said Voldemort. "What does please me," he added, raising his other hand toward Harry's face. "Is I can still play with my favorite pet."

Harry was in too much pain to take exception to the remark. "How," Harry choked. "A ghost can't-"

Voldemort touched his cheek to shut him up.

"Because of my noble gesture at my death. I offered to die and let you live. That is why you didn't die, Harry, and that is why we are still connected."

Voldemort released Harry's face and floated away.

"So why are you here?" said Harry.

"I'm here because you are, Harry."

"Are you saying you're going to haunt me for the rest of my life?" The idea was appalling.

“Won’t it be fun, Harry.”

Harry stood up, staring at Voldemort in disbelief.

“We’ll talk again later, Harry,” said Voldemort. “I’m going to look around. It’s been a while.”

Harry stared at the spot where Voldemort had disappeared. No, this couldn’t be happening to him. It was worse than a nightmare. That’s it. It’s a nightmare. He fell asleep at his desk. He’ll wake up any minute.

But Harry had never been that lucky. He went straight to Hermione’s office and urgently knocked on her door.

Hermione opened the door. “Harry, are you all right. You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

“I have,” said Harry. “Voldemort.”

“Voldemort?” said Hermione. “You’re kidding?”

“Do I look like I’m kidding,” said Harry. Since Harry was still shaking, he didn’t consider it. “He grabbed my face, Hermione, and put me to my knees.”

“That’s impossible, Harry,” said Hermione. “Ghosts can’t touch anyone nor can they hurt anyone.”

“I remember what pain feels like,” said Harry, getting frustrated. “He touched me and I felt it.”

“Harry-“

“You don’t believe me?” said Harry incredulously. Harry put his hand to his scar. *Voldemort.*

“Ah straight to your lawyer,” said Voldemort a few seconds later.

“She’s not a lawyer, she’s a teacher,” said Harry.

“Bad career move on her part,” said Voldemort. “She would have made an outstanding solicitor.”

“Just show yourself,” said Harry.

Harry heard him chuckled. “She doesn’t believe you, does she?”

“Harry, are you feeling all right?” said Hermione.

Voldemort laughed. “Oh this is priceless, my pet.”

“Don’t call me that,” Harry snapped.

“Harry, I’m getting worried,” said Hermione.

Voldemort laughed. “Oh how wonderful. Harry Potter driven to insanity by his tormented memories.” Voldemort continued to chuckle.

“Stop laughing, Voldemort,” said Harry. He turned to Hermione. “Don’t you hear him?”

“I don’t hear anything,” said Hermione. “Harry, are you feeling all right?”

“You believed me about the Triwizard Tournament,” said Harry.

“I saw your face,” said Hermione. “Now you just look – well-“

“What? Crazy?” said Harry.

“I was going to say desperate.”

“Fine,” Harry snapped and walked away. Voldemort followed him.

“Oh don’t take it so hard, Harry.”

“Shut up, Voldemort,” said Harry.

“Don’t try to make me angry Harry. I’m enjoying this too much.”

Harry tried to ignore Voldemort all the way back to his office so no one would see him talking to himself and when Harry entered his room, Voldemort didn’t follow. That surprised him.

Harry scanned his bookshelves, determined to look up everything he could about personal ghost hauntings. He had hoped he'd have Hermione's help. He brought a book he had found to breakfast the next morning and ate with his eyes on it, ignoring Hermione, who was casting him worried glances. Dumbledore and McGonagall were looking at him oddly too. Had Hermione told them? Great.

Harry knew Voldemort would show up. He wouldn't miss the opportunity to try to make the whole school think he was crazy. He endured the pain and tried to keep from flinching.

"I guess I'll have to try to sneak up on you, Harry," said Voldemort. "Your reaction is usually better than that."

Harry ignored him. It felt as if Voldemort was standing right in front of him.

Voldemort chuckled. "I'm bound to hit upon something to set you off, my pet." Voldemort chuckled. "I know how much you hate that, Harry. You do look rather angry."

The words Harry was looking at started to blur, the pain was increasing as if Voldemort held his hand out across the table towards Harry's face. Harry picked up the book and stood up. As he left the table, he heard Hermione call him.

He ignored her too. He went to his classroom trying to think of a way to get Voldemort to show himself. Harry wondered if the other ghosts could see him.

Voldemort was quiet but Harry knew he was still following him.

Peeves whizzed by him with the comment, "Crazy Harry Potter." Harry looked at him.

Voldemort chuckled. "No, Harry, they can't see or hear me either. I am your personal poltergeist and unless I want to be seen or heard no one will see or hear me but you."

Great, thought Harry.

“Oh, talk to me, Harry. You’re spoiling my fun.”
Harry fought the urge to say, “Too bad.”

“Harry, my son.”

Harry stopped dead and the pain that hit him was almost as bad as if Voldemort had touched his scar. He screamed and hit the floor clutching his head.

Voldemort didn’t laugh. “I see I’ve hit a nerve,” said Voldemort. “I also suggest you don’t try to walk through me.”

Apparently when Harry stopped, Voldemort didn’t and had passed right through Harry.

“Are you all right, Professor Potter?”

Two students came over and helped him to his feet. Struggling for his composure, fighting the pain that lingered and squashing his temper, he thanked them and moved on.

“No comment, Harry?”

Comment?

“Hah,” said Harry, with dawning. He figured out how he was going to force Voldemort to show himself. His 6 years would do it for him. Voldemort fascinated them and he would be so pleased, he would want to talk to them.

He didn’t have them again until tomorrow so he had to suffer through getting through his classes trying not to talk to Voldemort, enduring the occasional pain every time Voldemort came close to him and ignoring Voldemort’s comments during class.

The last wasn’t easy as Voldemort started to get personal, reminding Harry in vivid detail of their past.

At one point, during his 5th year class, where he was describing Azkaban and the dementors, Voldemort brought up Sirius and his time in Azkaban and Sirius’ time in Voldemort's cage.

"Will you shut up, all ready," said Harry.

"Er, we didn't say anything, Professor," said a student. Harry was pretty sure it had been Dave McIves which Harry assumed was Sean's brother.

"It's nothing, I wasn't talking to the class," said Harry.

"You slipped, Harry," said Voldemort, sounding pleased.

"Who were you talking to?" another student asked.

"No one," said Harry. "Forget it."

"Oh they won't forget, Harry. It will be all over the school by tomorrow."

But Harry's plan would be in effect by then.

Harry looked towards the sound of Voldemort's voice. "Oh, you think so?"

"Yes, Harry. You know it too." Voldemort laughed.

"Keep laughing, Voldemort," said Harry. "You taught me too well."

"You have a plan, do you, Harry?"

"Yes, now will you be quiet so I can finish the lesson," said Harry.

"Oh, by all means," said Voldemort with a chuckle.

By dinner, each class after that one started looking at him strangely. He didn't go to the Great Hall for the meal (he didn't want to see Dumbledore and the rest of the staff looking at him oddly either).

The next morning though, Harry was ready. As the 6 years came in, at least they *all* didn't look at him like he was nuts.

"Is everyone here?" Harry asked to cut the need to take attendance.

"Missy had to go to Madam Pomfrey," said Sean.

“She all right?” said Harry.

“She’s ok. She fell down a moving staircase.”

“Nasty those moving staircases,” said Harry. “I fell down one myself in my 5th year. Broke a rib and fractured my knee.”

“Harry, are you lying to your students?” said Voldemort. “Lucius and Goyle did that to you.”

“I stand corrected,” said Harry.

“Er, by who, Professor?” said Sean curiously.

“As many of you may have heard I have acquired my own personal ghost.”

“So it’s true, you’re hearing Voldemort’s voice?” said Sean.

“He said my name,” said Voldemort with surprise.

“Of course, whose class is this, Voldemort.” Harry turned back to the class. “It seems Voldemort has made it his death’s mission to annoy me.”

Voldemort chuckled.

“Is he here then?” said Cindy.

“He is,” said Harry, “And in honor of that fact, I’ve decided to base this lesson entirely on him.”

Voldemort chuckled. “Harry, I’m touched.”

“He’s honored,” Harry told the class.

“I said I was touched, Harry, not honored.”

“I stand corrected,” said Harry again. He magicked a comfy arm chair in the back corner. “Have a seat Voldemort. You may enjoy this lesson.”

“Why in the back, Harry?” said Voldemort.

“Because you’ve already given me a headache,” said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled and Harry felt the pain diminish.

“As we’ve discussed, Voldemort used several methods of persuasion to control people. His favorite was torture.”

“More like the threat of torture,” said Voldemort.

“I stand corrected again,” said Harry. “This however didn’t work with me so he had to devise other methods to attempt to get me to do what he wanted.”

“What was corrected?” asked a student.

Harry went on, “His other attempts, although innovative were pretty lame as well.”

“Harry,” said Voldemort, sounding insulted.

“Professor Weasley could find a loop hole in any of his little contracts despite Voldemort’s fondness for semantics.”

Voldemort laughed. “I know what you’re doing, Harry. You’re trying to manipulate me into joining this discussion.”

“Mmmm,” said Harry. He didn’t look towards the chair, but addressed the class “I thought I had learned manipulation from the master. I guess I was wrong there too. Pity.”

Harry felt Voldemort move toward him.

“All right, Harry,” said Voldemort. The class gasped as he materialized. “I’ll join this little discussion.” He continued to move toward Harry until he entered the flinch zone. “But I will have compensation.”

But Harry was smiling. “Go ahead, Voldemort. Show them. They can take it.”

"Can *you*, Harry?" said Voldemort, as he grabbed Harry's chin. The class gasped again as Harry hit his knees. Voldemort turned toward them. "As you can see Lord Voldemort can still put Harry Potter to his knees in pain. Pain so great even the Cruciatus Curse, which Harry can counter, pales to it."

"How is it you can touch him," said Cindy.

"Ah," he looked down at Harry's face. "A curious class. Is that why you picked this class?"

Harry nodded.

Voldemort let go and Harry took a couple of deep breaths as Voldemort moved away to study the class.

Harry pulled himself to his feet and leaned against his desk, pressing his palm to his scar.

"Will you tell them, Harry?" said Voldemort. "Or should I?"

Harry didn't really want that particular information public so he almost hugged Hermione as she rushed into the room.

"Professor-" She stopped dead when she saw Harry's hand still pressed to his forehead. Then she saw Voldemort.

"Ah, Miss Granger," said Voldemort. "Very nice to see you again."

"I told you, Voldemort, it's Professor Weasley now."

"How quaint," said Voldemort. "I still think you missed your calling, Hermione. You would have made an remarkable attorney."

"Oh, Harry," cried Hermione. "I'm so sorry."

"Hermione wait," called Harry as she rushed out of the room.

"Oh, dear, you've upset her."

Harry turned to Voldemort. "Me?" said Harry with surprise. "You know damn well why she's upset."

“Couldn’t be my fault,” said Voldemort looking appalled.

Several of the students laughed and Harry looked at them. “Did I mention what a warped sense of humor he has?”

“Shouldn’t you go after her, Harry,” said Voldemort.

“And leave you here? I don’t think so.”

“Harry, don’t you trust me?”

“No,” said Harry.

“I can’t hurt anyone,” said Voldemort.

“Except me,” said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled as he settled back into his chair in the back. “So how is Ron?”

The wizard in question strode into the room and Harry straightened. “Ron,” said Harry with surprise.

“Harry,” said Ron. “What did you say to Hermione?” He walked up to Harry without looking around.

“Ah, hello, Ron.”

Ron turned and made a frustrated gesture. To Harry he said, “Never mind answering that question.”

“Ron, what are you doing here?” said Harry.

“Hermione was worried about you,” said Ron. “She sent me an owl the other day.”

“So the Ministry sent you to make sure I’m not crazy,” said Harry.

Ron looked insulted. “I came here for *you*, damn it,” said Ron.

“Sorry,” muttered Harry.

Ron grinned. "But I do have to owl the Minister when I find out."

"All idiots in the ministry," said Voldemort.

Harry glared at him. "Ron's in the Ministry," said Harry. "We fixed it, remember."

"I stand corrected," quoted Voldemort. "And have you taught about that yet? How we fixed the ministry?"

Harry grimaced at him. "Not yet," said Harry.

"Why not?" said Voldemort. "Afraid they aren't ready or aren't *you* ready."

Harry ignored Voldemort's question and turned to Ron. "It's all right, Ron. After every thing that's happened to me, even I'm surprised I'm not crazy."

"No it isn't all right," said Ron. "After every thing you've been through I was *hoping* you *were* crazy." He glanced at Voldemort. "It seemed better than the alternative."

"Ron, I'm hurt," said Voldemort.

"You're dead," said Ron. "So would you mind butting out."

Harry laughed and so did most of the class. Voldemort chuckled.

"I've said it before, Harry," said Voldemort. "Your friends are very brave and loyal to the end."

"Yeah, I thought we saw that end," said Ron. "What-"

"Ron," said Harry loudly. The last thing he needed was Ron pissing off Voldemort. Ron didn't know he could still hurt Harry. He addressed the class. "This is Mr. Ronald Weasley, Professor Weasley's husband, my best friend and the Head of the Defense against the Dark Arts Dept. of the Ministry of Magic."

The class murmured respectful greetings.

“Harry, why didn’t you go into the Ministry?” said Voldemort.

Harry shrugged. “I was afraid it would give me a headache.”

“Surely you don’t blame all your little headache’s on me,” said Voldemort.

“Everything Harry’s been through *is* your fault,” said Ron.

Voldemort turned to Harry. “Is it, Harry?” Voldemort quizzed.

“No,” said Harry.

“Why?” said Voldemort.

“Choices,” said Harry.

Voldemort smiled. “Ah, Harry. I have taught you well.” Voldemort stood up and took several steps toward the front of the room. “But as the most powerful wizard in the world, I’m surprised they didn’t insist you join the Ministry.”

“Is he the most powerful wizard in the world,” asked Cindy.

“Do you doubt it?” said Voldemort. “My dear, when Harry and I were together, every wizard around us could feel the power we shared. Isn’t that right, Ron?”

“Voldemort,” said Harry. “If I was as powerful as you are trying to have everyone believe-“

“Don’t be so modest, Harry,” said Ron. “You know it’s true.”

Harry went on, “Then I would be strong enough to rid myself of a certain pesky poltergeist that doesn’t know when to be quiet.”

“But look what a valuable teaching aid you have,” said Voldemort. “I won’t let you omit little facts just because they embarrass you and you know I rarely lie, not when the truth is so much more satisfying.”

Harry opened his mouth to say something that in the old days probably would have got him punished, but he was interrupted.

“Professor Potter,” said Professor McGonagall, moving into the classroom. “I’ve heard some distressing – oh, dear.” She stopped when she saw Ron. “The Ministry has heard it too?”

“Hello, Minerva,” said Voldemort.

Professor McGonagall turned and saw him. “Oh, my,” she said and looked at Harry. “Then it’s true. He’s come back to haunt the school?”

“Oh no, Minerva. I’ve come back to haunt Harry,” said Voldemort.

“It’s all right, Professor,” said Harry. “He can’t hurt anyone.”

“Except you,” said Voldemort.

Harry sent him a glare.

“But the students shouldn’t be exposed-“

“It’s ok, Professor McGonagall,” said Cindy. “It’s weird but it’s kind of funny.”

Voldemort chuckled. “You see, Minerva. The class finds Harry’s situation amusing.”

“I think Cindy was referring to the repartee,” said Harry.

“Was she?” said Voldemort. He turned to the girl. “Were you?”

“Considering this class is going to get full marks for proving I’m not crazy and for putting up with you, her answer better be yes,” said Harry.

“Hermione, please,” begged Harry. “It’s all right.”

“No, Harry. I should have believed you.”

“Forget it,” said Harry. “Even Ron said he was *hoping* I was crazy.”

Hermione glanced at Ron. They were all in Hermione’s classroom. Hermione was sitting behind her desk and Harry and Ron had perched on top of the closest student desks.

“So, can I count on you?” said Harry.

“Of course,” said Hermione. “I’ve already been to the library and have taken out a bunch of books. I don’t know why he can touch you yet, but-“

“What!?” said Ron. “What do you mean he can touch him?”

Now that Harry knew why, he felt bad. He had never told either of them the *entire* truth about what had happened in the Chamber of Secrets.

“Voldemort can still touch Harry,” Hermione told Ron. “And it still hurts him.”

Ron stared at Harry as if suddenly he knew Harry had left something out.

“Anyway,” said Hermione. “I know why he’s haunting you *now*.”

“Why?” said Harry eager to change the subject. Ron was still looking at him suspiciously.

Hermione glanced up at Ron then looked at Harry. “I don’t think you’ll like it.”

Great, thought Harry. “Just tell me Hermione.”

“Well, he never changed his will,” said Hermione.

“What are you talking about?” said Harry.

“Well, remember in our 6th year, Tom M. Riddle left you the entire Slytherin fortune?”

“Yes,” said Harry.

“Well, it’s still yours,” said Hermione. “He never changed it. And well, it went into effect as of your 25th birthday and you turned 25 this last July.”

“So that’s why he can haunt you now,” said Ron. “Maybe that is why he can touch him,” Ron said to Hermione.

“No, it can’t be,” said Hermione. “Everything I’ve read indicates it would have to be something very magical. Some very strong connection.”

Harry heard Voldemort laugh, then felt the burn in his head. Hermione’s classroom was quite large. How long had Voldemort been there listening?

“But Harry and Voldemort’s connection has always been strong,” said Ron.

“No,” said Hermione and she turned to glare at Harry. “What happened that you didn’t tell us, Harry?”

Voldemort’s laughter got louder and the pain got stronger. “So you didn’t even tell them, Harry,” said Voldemort.

Harry was staring at his hands.

“What didn’t he tell us?” said Ron.

Harry almost groaned. They had heard Voldemort.

“Choices, Voldemort,” said Harry softly. “How would I know?”

Voldemort grabbed Harry’s face and Harry hit his knees looking up into the red slits.

Voldemort held Harry’s gaze. “After Harry thrust the sword through my heart, I conceded my life to him so he could live. I gave up my right to demand his death at mine because I wanted him to live. Harry didn’t understand that I could do that. He insisted that he had to die to insure that I would so he picked up my hand and pressed it to his scar. He held it there until he passed out from the pain.

“If not for Harry’s valiant sacrifice and my noble gesture, we both would have died. But because of both our actions, Harry lived and I

am immortal *and* we are still connected,” said Voldemort. “Aren’t we Harry?”

Voldemort let go and Harry hit the floor.

Hermione bent over him, her arm around his chest. “Oh Harry,” said Hermione. “You should have told us.”

“I didn’t know,” rasped Harry still breathing hard.

“Why the hell didn’t you listen to Voldemort?” said Ron angrily.

Harry turned his head to look at Ron.

“He’s the one who always told you everything. How often has he lied to you?” said Ron.

Voldemort stared at Ron then looked at Harry.

Harry saw Voldemort smirk but there was a serious intensity in those red eyes. “Harry, you know better than to argue with me.”

Harry dropped his gaze to the floor as Hermione helped him up.

Harry’s chest ached. It *was* his own fault. He walked soundlessly from the room.

“Harry,” called Ron.

Harry kept walking, expecting to hear Voldemort’s smug comments behind him. But the halls were quiet as Harry walked to his office and into his private room. Rowan looked up at him as he entered and flew instantly to him. She could see his pain.

She looked up into his face and started crying.

Harry laid down on his bed, Rowan still crying on his chest and let The Phoenix’ tears wash away his pain and guilt. Voldemort couldn’t physically hurt anyone but Harry after all, Harry reminded himself. He may become a nuisance but he couldn’t hurt anyone.

Great, more guilt. He couldn’t seem to break the habit of a lifetime.

Chapter 3

Another Contract

The legal formalities found Harry about a week later. He stared down at the stack of parchment. His own inheritance from Gryffindor had been extensive and Slytherin now more than doubled it.

“Just sign them, Harry,” said Voldemort from his chair at the back of Harry’s classroom. “You have the fame and the glory of being the wizard who defeated me, why shouldn’t you get the glittering prizes.”

“I have to think about it,” said Harry.

“Yes, think of all the good you could do with that money.”

Harry sighed. “Why didn’t you change it back?” said Harry.

“You know why I did it, Harry,” said Voldemort.

“Yes, so the wizarding world would think you bought me.”

“Yes, well in the end, as I told you, I was rather fond of you,” said Voldemort.

“I remember how painful it is to have you fond of me,” said Harry.

“Always the cynic, my Harry,” said Voldemort.

“I’ll ignore that,” said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. “So it became quite personal that you would inherit my fortune.”

“Why?”

“Why do you think, Harry?” said Voldemort. “If we both died...”

“Both houses would die.”

“Yes, and no one would ever be as powerful as we were,” said Voldemort. “And if you lived...”

“Both houses would survive.”

“Yes, and the prophecy would have another chance to be fulfilled.”

The prophecy. Harry was sick to death of it – of anything related to fate or destiny. Thank God Sybil Trelawney rarely came out of her tower.

“Voldemort, don’t you have something better to do?” said Harry with exasperation.

“But Harry, our favorite class is about to start,” said Voldemort.

As the 6th years filed in, Harry put the parchments in his drawer and pulled out his notes. He looked over the class.

“Where’s Sean?” said Harry.

Just then the boy in question raced into the room, breathing heavy. “Sorry, Professor,” said Sean. “Stan Grable won’t leave me alone.”

Stan was a 7th year and the current Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Harry stood up and moved around his desk to lean on it. “What’s he on about now?”

Sean took his seat and looked rather embarrassed. “Er-“

“Never mind, you don’t have to tell me,” said Harry.

“You were just curious, right Harry?” said Voldemort.

Harry sent Voldemort a glance. “Most people know how interested I am in the game,” said Harry. “And I know that they’re playing Slytherin on Saturday.”

“Ah yes,” said Voldemort. “Youngest Seeker of the century. Can you still do that creative little dive of yours.”

“Voldemort,” said Harry. “This lesson isn’t on Quidditch.”

“Can you?” said Sean eagerly.

"See, Harry," said Voldemort. "The class wants to know too."

"See what you've done, Voldemort," said Harry, sending him a glare.

"Stop being so modest and answer the question," said Voldemort.

Still glaring at Voldemort, Harry said, "Yes I can still do it now will you be quiet so I can teach."

But the class had started murmuring with that disclosure.

"Professor," said Sean. Harry turned to the boy. "That's what Stan was on about. I nearly killed myself last week during practice trying to do the Potter Dive."

Harry blinked at him and Voldemort laughed.

"Ah, Harry," said Voldemort. "Famous for more than staying alive now."

Harry sat on his desk, running a hand through his hair and hoped he wasn't turning red.

"Anyway," said Harry. "The Unforgivable Curses. Who can tell me what they are?"

"Clever subject change," said Voldemort. "Why didn't you become a professional Quidditch player, Harry? Didn't they ask you?"

Harry ignored him as several students raised their hands.

"Dawn," Harry called on a student in the back.

"The Imperius Curse, The Cruciatus Curse and The Killing Curse," said Dawn Miller.

"And another subject which Harry Potter is famous for," said Voldemort. "Since he is the only wizard in the world who can defend himself against all three."

"Voldemort," said Harry with frustration. "Will you be quiet?"

“Will you beg me?”

Harry sent him a glare then moved off his desk and around it.

“Answer my question first,” said Voldemort. “And I’ll stop interrupting.”

“Why?” said Harry. “So you can gloat?”

That got the chuckle. “Would you like me to?”

Harry saw Voldemort’s brows shoot up. Oh yes, he’d love to start. Harry wasn’t about to open that can of worms. “Which question?” said Harry.

Voldemort smiled knowingly.

He still knows everything.

“Why aren’t you playing Quidditch?” said Voldemort. “Didn’t they ask you?”

“They’d have to be stupid not to have asked him,” said Sean, looking interested.

The entire class looked interested as well. Harry sighed. “Yes they asked and I declined.”

“Why?” said Voldemort.

“That’s my business,” said Harry.

“Come now, Harry,” said Voldemort. “I satisfy your curiosity, satisfy mine.”

“I’d say the answer is obvious,” said Cindy.

The whole class looked at her. She really was like Hermione. Hermione thought everything was obvious, although it usually was to her.

“Is it?” said Voldemort. “Do tell us, my dear girl.”

“Er,” said Cindy with a hesitant glance at Harry. “Well considering how modest the Professor is, I’d say he was just tired of being in the spotlight all the time.”

Harry turned and took a jar of spiders out of a drawer and set it on his desk.

“Is that the reason?” said Voldemort.

“The Imperius Curse can be countered by many,” said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. “I take that as a yes,” said Voldemort.

Harry went on as if Voldemort hadn’t spoken. “It takes a certain character-“

“Which is why he could do it even at the young age of 14,” said Voldemort. “And against me.”

“Voldemort,” said Harry. “You said you’d stop interrupting.”

Voldemort chuckled.

Harry put them through their paces with The Imperius Curse. Several of them were proficient in fighting it but only one was able to throw it off completely.

“Very good, Missy,” said Harry.

Missy beamed at the praise as she returned to her seat.

“You’re not using your wand though, Harry,” said Voldemort.

“Voldemort, they’re students.” He turned back to the class. “Now the Cruciatus Curse is a bit harder to counter,” said Harry.

“Will you tell them why you can counter it, Harry?” said Voldemort.

Harry ignored him, reached into the jar and picked out a spider.

“Spiders, Harry?” said Voldemort.

“I’m not demonstrating the Cruciatus Curse on students,” said Harry.

“Ah where is Lucius when you need him,” said Voldemort.

Harry laughed at that – had to. “Sorry, Voldemort,” said Harry. “I guess you didn’t hear, Lucius got away.”

“Did he?” said Voldemort. “I always said he was slippery.”

Slippery he was but he wasn’t clever enough to slip away from Harry. Harry knew damn well where he was. He wasn’t about to tell anyone that however. Not even the Malfoys knew where Lucius was. Narcissa never asked Harry, nor did Draco who had left the country after he was cleared and had seemingly ceased to exist.

“There’s a mission for you,” said Harry. “Go hunt down Lucius Malfoy and play with him for a while.”

“Nice try, Harry,” said Voldemort. To the class he said, “Harry is able to counter the Cruciatus Curse because-“

“Voldemort,” interrupted Harry.

Hermione’s entrance stopped Harry from saying something that would have probably made Voldemort angry enough to touch him again and thusly show the class exactly why Harry could counter the curse.

She walked right up to Harry and leaned close to his ear.

“If you want him to go away,” said Hermione. “Call Rowan.”

“What are you telling him, Hermione?”

“Why?” said Harry.

“No ghost can be in the same room with a phoenix,” whispered Hermione. “That’s why he never goes into your private room.”

Harry looked at Voldemort with triumph. “Really?”

“Yes,” said Hermione.

“What did she tell you?” said Voldemort.

Harry simply looked at the door. “Rowan,” he called.

“Very clever, Hermione” said Voldemort and he disappeared as Harry’s phoenix soared into the room and landed on Harry’s arm.

As she was really quite stunning, with her brilliant sapphire plumage with black and silver highlights, the class all oohed and ahed. Rowan, eating up the praise, fluttered her wings importantly.

“This is Rowan,” said Harry, holding out his arm so everyone could see her. “She is my-“ Rowan nipped his ear. “Sorry, girl,” said Harry. To the class, he said, “I am her wizard.”

Several girls giggled.

“Since Professor Weasley has informed me that no ghost can be in the same room with a phoenix, you’ll probably be seeing a lot of her.”

The class laughed and Harry magicked her a grand perch near a window. Rowan rubbed her head into Harry’s chin, pecking at the chair around his neck. Harry laughed, pulled the chain out of her beak, pushing the medallion back under his robe and held his arm out towards the perch. She flew to it. Then Harry picked up Hermione’s hand and kissed the back of it.

“Thanks,” said Harry. “I can always count on you.”

Hermione just smiled and strolled out of the room.

Harry enjoyed a wonderful Voldemort free week. According to Hermione, Voldemort had sulked for the first couple of days but was now quite angry that Harry wouldn’t *play*.

It was the start of his 6th year class that the huge snake slithered in and coiled toward Harry.

“It’s all right,” said Harry. “This is Nagini. Voldemort’s snake. He must be getting desperate.”

"You have made the master very angry, Harry Potter," said Nagini.

"Fat lot, I care," Harry told her.

"Professor, you can talk to snakes?"

"Yes," said Harry. To Nagini, he said, *"What does he want?"*

"A contract."

"He has nothing to bargain with," said Harry.

Hermione rushed in and stopped dead when she saw the snake. "He sent her?"

"Yes," said Harry. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, Harry," said Hermione. "He says he'll go to your house."

"WHAT!" Harry jumped to his feet. "Can he do that?"

"Yes."

"Damn him," muttered Harry. He looked back "Does he have to honor a contract?"

"Oh, yes," said Hermione. "Even as a ghost, he is bound by wizards honor. But because you and he can still shake on it, you can have a binding contract with him."

Harry nodded and turned to Nagini. *"Tell him I'll see him."* He turned to the class. "Interesting development," said Harry. "But a good example of wizards honor and defense against Voldemort. Would you like to see us negotiate with Voldemort?"

"Oh Harry, do you think that's wise?" said Hermione.

But the class was enthralled. Harry held up his arm and Rowan flew to it.

"Go on, girl," said Harry. "I have to do this."

She complained mightily.

"It'll be all right. Go on."

Still complaining, Rowan flew out of the room. Nagini circled Harry's desk.

"Call him, Master Harry," said Nagini.

Harry put his hand to his scar. *Voldemort.*

Voldemort appeared before Harry, inside the flinch zone.

"That wasn't very nice, Harry," said Voldemort.

"So who said I was nice," said Harry.

Voldemort grabbed Harry's face. "Harry," said Voldemort as Harry lowered to his knees. "I'm angry enough already." He looked to Hermione. "Are you here as Harry's legal council?"

Harry shook his head.

"No," said Hermione. "Harry has to speak for himself."

"Very well." Voldemort released Harry and moved away. He glanced at the class. "Ah, our favorite class as witnesses. I like that."

Voldemort waited while Harry got to his feet and leaned against his desk. Harry pressed a hand to his forehead.

"So," said Voldemort. "How much are you willing to concede to keep me away from your wife?"

"What are you asking?" said Harry.

"Well for starters, stop spending ever damned minute with that phoenix of yours."

"You know that's Rowan's idea," said Harry. "She's protecting me. I'll keep her in my private room if we come to a satisfactory agreement."

“Send her home,” said Voldemort.

“Are you saying she will be needed there?” said Harry.

Voldemort laughed. “Ah, Harry, you have learned much from me. Very well, I will accept that.” He turned serious. “What are your restrictions?”

“You will stay out of my younger year classes. You will not go near my house. You will not touch me in front of any students.”

Harry waited while Voldemort considered his terms.

“You ask much, Harry,” said Voldemort. “I amend: I will avoid your 1st through 4th year classes, unless you expressly ask me to them. I will not go to the Potter residence unless you are there.”

“But not until Ginger gives birth,” said Harry quickly.

“That isn’t until the spring, Harry,” said Voldemort.

“Yes.”

Voldemort stared at him. “Then I will see you sign that document now.”

Harry looked back at him. This was a very tough power play. “All right,” said Harry.

Voldemort went on. “I will not touch you in front of any students except these,” Voldemort indicated the class. “You said they could take it and they have. And we will re-negotiate by the summer break.”

Hermione leaned toward Harry and whispered, “He can’t touch your scar.”

Harry didn’t think there was anyway Voldemort was going to agree with that. Not with his *threat of torture* manipulation.

Turning to Nagini, Harry said, “*He can’t touch my scar.*”

Voldemort turned to the snake also. *"Nagini, Harry knows I won't agree to that."*

"Without provocation," said Harry.

Voldemort appeared interested. *"And who decides the provocation?"*

"He does," Harry told Nagini. Harry met Voldemort's stare. He laughed. Harry turned back to the snake. *"But if I contest it, I can call Rowan to me."*

"Sign the document now, Harry," said Voldemort. "And I will agree."

Harry went around his desk, opened the drawer and pulled out the papers. Dipping his quill in the ink, he stared at the X on the bottom of it.

"Sign it, Harry," said Voldemort.

"Wait!" cried Hermione. "What is it?"

"Sign it, Harry. It's not for you. It's for the heirs."

Harry stared at the parchment.

"Wait, Harry," said Hermione again. "Tell me what it is."

Harry quickly signed it and the parchment vanished.

"Very good, Harry," said Voldemort. "I agree to your terms." He held out his hand. "Are we agreed?"

"Wait, Harry. What was that last part?" cried Hermione. "I didn't understand it."

"Well, Harry," said Voldemort, staring into Harry's eyes. "Do you agree?"

Harry looked at Voldemort's hand between them. "Yes," said Harry, reaching out and taking Voldemort's hand. "Agreed."

Voldemort quickly grabbed Harry's face with his free hand. As Harry lowered to his knees, Voldemort pulled his hand from Harry's and placed it on the side of Harry's head, his thumb raised over Harry's scar.

A cry of pain ripped out of him.

"For that week of boredom that you thrust on me, Harry," said Voldemort with a large amount of menace. "I think you need a few days out of commission."

"No, Voldemort," cried Hermione. "Harry, what was the last agreement? What should I do?"

"Not a thing, Hermione," said Voldemort. He stared into Harry face, looking very pleased.

Harry, of course, couldn't speak. He willed Hermione to call Rowan but she didn't. She was watching in horror as Voldemort continued to hold onto Harry, his finger perched over the scar. Everything blurred around him.

"Just provocation, Harry," said Voldemort. "Don't ignore me again."

Voldemort's thumb hit his scar and Harry hit the floor with a soul ripping cry of agony.

Over him, he heard Voldemort say, "Class dismissed."

Into the dead silence, Hermione ordered, "Sean, go get Professor Snape. Hurry." She knelt beside him and placed an arm around him. "Harry, can you hear me? Severus is on his way."

Breathing was hard enough. Harry didn't think he could speak. It had been over 7 years since he had felt this kind of pain. Harry hadn't missed it.

"Hello, Severus."

"What did you use this time, My Lord?" said Severus. Harry heard Severus lean over him.

"He said he's go to Harry's house," said Hermione, her voice choked.

"You used a pregnant woman?" said Snape. "That's low. Even for you." Snape lowered his voice. "Harry, can you move?"

"Not yet, Severus." Harry didn't recognize his own voice.

"Where is his phoenix?" said Snape.

"He can not use his phoenix," said Voldemort. "And he knows it. Wizard's honor."

Severus sighed and magicked a stretcher. "Mr. McIves, help me."

Harry cried out in pain as he was moved to the stretcher. He could feel the blood running down his face. He heard a chorus of horrified gasps before complete blackness over him.

Three days later he forced himself to go to class. He was still in a great deal of pain and was still weak, but he had to teach. He also had an idea how to manipulate Voldemort and contest Voldemort's 'just provocation' if the right opportunity presented itself.

He was a little nervous about facing his sixth years. They had seen Voldemort put him in pain before, but doubted they'd ever seen the kind of torture Harry had been through.

There was little he could do about it now. And in all reality, it was his favorite class. As a whole they had a good sense of humor and they seemed to sense his embarrassment about some things and readily accepted his subject changes.

Even as early in the school year as it was, Harry felt as if he had bonded with them. Maybe because they were curious, maybe because they weren't afraid of Voldemort, but they took him seriously. But probably because due to Voldemort, they had seen Harry, the cynical, sarcastic pessimist and still respected him. In any case, it was because of Voldemort.

Damn manipulative bastard, he was still trying to control Harry's life. Harry would be damned if he didn't fight back.

The class came in quietly and sat down. Several of them looked surprised to see him. Snape had been subbing for him.

Harry put down his quill and looked up at them.

“Are you all right, Professor?” said Missy.

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Just weak,” admitted Harry. “Now that you’ve all seen first hand how merciless Voldemort can be, we won’t need anymore demonstrations. Will we?”

“No, Professor,” the class murmured.

“And watch what you say about me outside this class room,” said Harry. “He’s going to be listening particularly to *this* class for ammunition.”

“We understand,” said Sean.

“You can count on us,” said Dawn.

“What if he’s all ready here?” said Lucas Wilson.

“Professor Potter would know,” said Sean.

Harry didn’t feel like correcting him. With the pain he was still enduring, Voldemort could indeed be there. But Harry doubted it. Voldemort liked this class as well and had never snuck into it since his presence had become known. He also doubted Voldemort would think Harry was even well enough to teach.

“All right,” said Harry. “What did you all figure out about magical contracts?”

“That it’s like dealing with the devil,” said Rufus Milford. Harry noticed that Rufus was a wisecracker but he also seemed to be the most unnerved by Voldemort.

The class laughed and Harry grinned at him.

“Well not everyone has had to negotiate with Voldemort,” said Harry.

They spent the first half of the class discussing points of a contract. If anyone in the class noticed that Harry hadn't stood up once, nor sat on his desk (as he normally did), they didn't mention it. Then Harry told them to pair up and gave each group a dispute to make a contract for.

They were quietly working while Harry was working on a letter to Ginger. Harry hadn't told her about Voldemort yet. He didn't want to upset her. He had asked Ron and Hermione not to mention it yet either. Was there a delicate way to tell your wife that you're being haunted by the century's most evil Dark Lord? Harry couldn't seem to find it.

Harry felt the pain increase but didn't look up. Voldemort had arrived. Time to put his plan into action.

"Ah, Harry," said Voldemort from across the room. It sounded like he was in his chair in the back. "Up so soon? The last time I touched your scar, you were unconscious for four months."

Harry still didn't look up. "You wouldn't like the response off the top of my head, so give me a minute."

Several students snorted.

Voldemort chuckled. "What ever do you have them doing?"

"Negotiating contracts," said Harry.

"Why?"

"To see what they gleamed from our example of brilliant negotiating." Harry still hadn't looked at him. Harry glanced at the last letter he'd gotten from Ginger.

"What are you doing?" said Voldemort.

"What's with all the questions?" said Harry.

"Why?"

“Because I’m trying to work.”

“And what are you working on?” said Voldemort again. “Tell me, Harry. I’m curious.”

“I’m working on my letter of resignation,” Harry muttered.

The entire class reacted with protests.

Harry looked up at them. “I’m kidding,” said Harry. “I’m kidding.”

Voldemort chuckled. “And you say *I* have a warped sense of humor.”

Harry looked back down at his letter. “You *do* have a warped sense of humor.” Harry still hadn’t looked at him and he knew it would start to annoy Voldemort very soon.

“Like father, like son,” said Voldemort.

So Voldemort *had* noticed all ready. He was trying to bait Harry into anger. Harry suppressed his temper. He was in enough pain and didn’t have the strength to explode as he normally would have. Harry was going to win this round if it killed him.

“Actually,” said Harry. “I’m told my father did have a very wicked sense of humor. To quote, ‘Quite the double act, Sirius Black and James Potter.’”

Voldemort was silent for a few minutes, which Harry attributed to his own anger. Voldemort hated when Harry brought up Sirius. Voldemort floated around the students, looking over their shoulders at their contracts.

The students didn’t seem to mind, so Harry tried to keep working on his letter.

“Harry,” said Voldemort. “What are you working on?”

“Will you give me a break for crying out loud.”

“Harry, look at me.”

Voldemort was annoyed now. "If you must know," said Harry. "I'm writing to Ginger. Happy now?"

"Professor Potter?"

Harry glanced up. "Yes, Cindy?"

"We've finished our contract and-"she hesitated.

Harry waved her toward his desk. She handed him her parchment. On top of it was a smaller piece of paper with a note.

We think we know what you're doing. We have an idea to help you contest the punishment. I need to send you an owl.

"May I be excused?" said Cindy. "I'm feeling a little sick to my stomach."

Harry stared at the note. The class figured it out? Someone must be a parseltongue. Send him an owl? Harry considered it. Might work.

"He turns my stomach too, Cindy," said Harry. "Of course you may be excused." He grabbed a piece of parchment. "I'll write you a pass."

Harry added on the note:

Use Hedwig. She'll let you if you address it to me.

"Thank you, Sir," said Cindy and she left.

"Making my students sick now too, are you Voldemort," said Harry dryly.

"I do what I can, my pet," said Voldemort.

Harry let that one go by too.

"Harry, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, Voldemort," said Harry. "I'm busy so please be quiet."

"I don't believe you," said Voldemort.

“Too bad.”

“Harry, look at me.”

The class continued to appear to be working diligently but Harry kept noticing several of them glancing toward the open window.

“Harry, I know what’s wrong,” said Voldemort.

Harry dipped his quill. “Congratulations.”

“I can make you look at me,” said Voldemort.

“I don’t think you will,” said Harry.

“Why?”

“For the same reason you’ve spent the entire class at the back of the room,” said Harry.

Hedwig soared in, stalling Voldemort’s response. Harry lifted his arm.

“Hey, girl,” said Harry as she settled on his arm and nipped his hand. Harry took the parchment from her leg and stroked her. Harry kept a dish of bird treats on his desk so Hedwig jumped to it and took one then flew to Rowan’s perch.

Harry looked at the note.

Hope this works.

“Who’s it from?”

Voldemort’s voice came from over his left shoulder and Harry’s hand hit his scar. The new pain combined with the pain he was all ready dealing with knocked Harry out of his chair to a seat on the floor. He finally looked up at Voldemort.

Voldemort floated over him, studying Harry expression.

“So I was right,” said Voldemort. “You’re not recovered enough. You’ve been teaching this whole lesson in pain.”

"You were right?" said Harry, staring into those red eyes. "So you knew."

"Of course I knew. No one can read your reactions better than I can, you know it too, which is why you haven't looked at me all class."

"You knew how much pain I was already in," said Harry. "Yet you did what you just did?"

Voldemort chuckled. "Yes, Harry, I can always tell when you—"

Harry smiled and Voldemort's smile vanished.

"I will only accept one punishment per provocation, Voldemort," said Harry. "I contest this one."

Voldemort looked at the note on Harry's desk then down at Harry. "Semantics, Harry?"

"Rowan," called Harry with a grin.

Voldemort grabbed Harry's face. "Oh very good, Harry. I have taught you well." He reached out his other hand and touched Harry's cheek.

A cry of pain ripped out of him.

"I concede," said Voldemort and he vanished as Rowan swooped into the room.

Harry sat by his desk, cradling Rowan to his chest as she cried his pain away. He stood up. His class was applauding and high-fiving each other.

"Are you all right, Professor?"

Harry smiled at them. "I'm fine, Missy." He held up Rowan, who fluttered her wings impressively. "Rowan takes good care of her wizard."

Rowan bit his ear.

“What?” said Harry as she went to her perch and nudged Hedwig who moved over.

The class laughed. Harry looked at them.

“So who’s the Parseltongue?” said Harry.

“Cindy,” said Sean.

Harry shook his head. “Another Gryffindor Parseltongue,” muttered Harry with a grin. “I can just hear Snape now.”

“Yes well, Cindy understood the entire last part of the contract and translated for Professor Weasley. She told us that you would probably try to manipulate Voldemort to contest and get back at him.”

“When we saw what you were doing, well-“said Missy.

Harry smiled proudly at them. “Full marks for all of you and fifty points for Gryffindor,” said Harry. “You’ve helped to outmaneuver the most evil Dark Lord of the Century. If that isn’t Defense Against the Dark Arts, I don’t know what is.”

Chapter 4

Quidditch

To reward his Gryffindors further, Harry planned a little party in the Gryffindor common room. He arranged with the House Elves to have stuff prepared so that when Harry got there, he could magic them a bonanza of snacks.

As he moved through the halls toward the tower, he was surprised Voldemort didn't appear to annoy him. Harry guessed Voldemort was trying to think of a way to get back at him.

He stopped before the Fat Lady in the pink dress.

"Password?" said the Fat Lady.

Harry stared at her. "I don't know it," said Harry. "Just open up. You know who I am."

"I do," said the Fat Lady. "But you know I won't open up without the password."

"Please," said Harry.

The Fat Lady smiled at him. "You gave me enough trouble during the seven years you were here, Harry. Sorry."

Harry looked around for a student. No one was in the Hall.

He looked back at the Fat Lady. "I'll cheat," he threatened her.

"You will do what you must," she said. "You know I can't open without the password."

Harry sighed. *What a nightmare.*

He apparated before the fire in the common room. Several students jumped up, startled.

"Sorry," said Harry. "The Fat Lady wouldn't open. I had to cheat."

"But, Professor," said one of the younger Gryffindors. "You can't apparate or disapparate at Hogwarts. How..."

Several students had crowded around Harry, listening with interest.

Harry smiled down at them. "But I am the heir of Gryffindor," said Harry. "And the heirs of all the Houses can apparate and disapparate within the school." He noticed Sean McIlves and met his gaze. "Pretty sad when the Heir of Gryffindor can't even get passed the portrait into the common room, isn't it."

Sean laughed. "What are you doing here, Professor?"

"Glad you asked," said Harry. "Stand back," he told the crowd. When they had backed away, Harry raised his hand and a table with all sorts of treats and drinks appeared in the middle of the room.

"Wow," someone said.

"A little reward, courtesy of the 6 years for their help this morning," said Harry.

Students were descending from the dorms, at first curious to see what was going on then thrilled with the unexpected party.

Harry reached over a student and grabbed a bottle of butterbeer then stepped back to watch the kids.

"This wasn't necessary, you know."

Harry turned to Cindy Larsen who had spoken. He took a sip of his drink.

"I thought it was," said Harry.

Several other sixth years approached them.

"This is great, Professor," said Rufus. "Thanks."

"No thank you," said Harry. He glanced fondly around the room. "I always loved celebrations in this room. It's like being home again."

The students pressured Harry into a chair by the fire.

"Tell us what it was like when you went here," said a student.

"It hasn't changed much," said Harry. "It wasn't all that long ago that I went here. Most of the teachers are still here."

"But you got into something dangerous every year you were here," said Cindy. "The Sorcerers Stone, the Chamber of Secrets, Sirius Black, the Triwizard Tournament."

Harry laughed. "I think the most dangerous things I faced coming to school aside from Voldemort and the Basilisk was a house elf named Dobby and a DADA teacher named Gilderoy Lockhart."

Many of the students laughed. Others looked confused.

The questions continued and Harry answered them the best he could. He spoke mostly about the students he went to school with and where they were now. He told them of the Quidditch celebrations and the Weasley's trick candies. Most of the students knew of Fred and George's shop. It was as well known as Zonkos.

He mentioned how because of Voldemort, Gryffindor had lost out on winning the cup the first two years Harry had been at school.

"I thought the team was going to soothe me when we won the third year," said Harry fondly. "Boy was that a celebration."

It was midnight when the portrait swung open. Many of the students had gone to bed but the older ones had remained.

"What is going on in here?" demanded Professor McGonagall.

"Just a little party," said Stan Grable.

"For what?"

"Er," said Stan and looked at Harry.

Harry stood up and turned to her.

“Professor Potter?” said McGonagall with surprise.

“Sorry, Professor,” said Harry. “My sixth years did an extraordinary job helping me with Voldemort. I thought it warranted a small party.”

“You call this small?” said McGonagall, looking around at the mess.

Harry bit his lip. “Sorry Professor.”

McGonagall sent him a searching look then a grin. “Just don’t make it too late, Professor. The Fat Lady is complaining that she can’t sleep.”

Harry smiled at her. “All right, Professor.”

“And don’t forget to clean it up,” she added on her way out. “I don’t want the house elves complaining.”

The portrait swung closed behind her and Harry turned to Sean and Missy on his left. For the third time they shifted awkwardly.

“What-“ Harry cut himself off as he finally noticed what they had been doing. They were trying to keep Harry from seeing what was on the wall behind him to that side of the common room. “What the hell is that?” demanded Harry.

Sean looked at the floor. “It’s your wall, sir.”

“My wall?” said Harry incredulously. He moved through the students to look at the wall strewn with pictures and newspaper articles. Pictures that Harry remembered Colin Creevy taking, articles he recalled Rita Skeeter writing.

Fragments of...

“Is that what was left of my Nimbus,” said Harry, still in a state of disbelief.

“Um, yes,” said Cindy.

“I’m going to kill Colin,” muttered Harry.

“Professor,” said Sean. “It wasn’t Mr. Creevy’s idea.”

Harry looked at him.

"Well," explained Sean. "Apparently after you were found in the Chamber of Secrets with Voldemort, the entire house of Gryffindor decided to honor you. They created this wall, thinking you were going to die. It was created as a memorial."

Harry stared at the wall. He reached out and touched the glass over the picture of the entire Gryffindor Quidditch team converging on him after he caught the snitch that had won them their first Quidditch Cup.

Then Harry saw the blank piece of very old parchment. He laughed.

"How did they get *that*?" said Harry.

Stan looked at it. "What that old parchment?"

"Yes."

"Rumor has it," said Stan. "That Professor Dumbledore gave that to a Neville Longbottom to add to the case."

"Neville," said Harry softly. He searched the glass enclosure until he found a picture. "That's Neville," Harry pointed him out. "He's got a shop in Hogsmeade now. Sells all sorts of little devices and trinkets."

"Oh," said Cindy. "That's *Grandma's Trunk*."

Harry looked at her and grinned. "Is that what he called it?" said Harry.

"Yes," said Cindy. She looked back at the picture with a frown. "He looks a lot different now. He's lost a lot of weight."

Harry turned back to the case. "I'll have to go and see him," said Harry distracted by the blank parchment. Harry knew what it was. With that, Harry could always know where Voldemort was.

He grabbed the side of the case. "How does this open?" said Harry.

"It's sealed," said Sean. "Professor Dumbledore locked it."

Harry looked at him. "You're kidding right?" said Harry. Harry raised his hand. "Alohomora," said Harry.

The glass case sprung open.

"I need this," said Harry, gently extracting the parchment. Harry closed and locked the case again then looked down at the map.

"But, Professor," said Stan. "No one knows what that is or how to work it."

Harry sent him a "you're kidding" look too.

"Show us," said Cindy, eagerly.

Sean caught on too. "Yes, please, Professor. Show us what it does and why you need it."

Harry looked at them. There were only 8 of them left. Seven from his sixth year class and Stan, the Quidditch team captain. He grinned at them and brought it over to the table. A sweep of his hand cleared the table and he laid the parchment on the surface.

"This is the Marauder's Map," said Harry. "It was created by my father and his band of reprobate friends when they were cavorting around the school as unregistered animagi."

"So what does it do?" whispered Missy.

"Stan," said Harry. "Tap it with your wand and try to get it show its secret."

Stan tapped the map. "Reveal your secret," said Stan.

Nothing.

"Tell it who you are," said Harry. "In detail."

Stan blinked at Harry for a moment then turned back to the map. With a tap, he said, "I, Stan Grable, Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team and Head Boy command you to reveal your secret."

Words started appearing across the page.

Mr. Padfoot shudders to think what a Head Boy would do with this old useless piece of parchment.

Mr. Moony thinks it is fortunate however that it is still in Gryffindor hands.

Mr. Wormtail agrees with Mr. Padfoot and Mr. Moony but knows how fond Mr. Prongs is of Quidditch and wonders what he thinks.

Mr. Prongs thinks that his son is having a spot of fun and does not mind at all if he has reacquired the map and wishes to show it to those he trusts.

Every student turned to him after Harry's father had voiced his opinion. Harry glanced at them. "Pretty cool, huh," said Harry.

"Show us," begged Stan.

Harry laughed. He tapped the map with the words, "I solemnly swear I'm up to no good."

The map of Hogwarts appeared before them as did the dots identifying every witch and wizard there and where they were.

"Wow," said Lucas Wilson.

The others were equally impressed but Harry was studying the map until he found the dot he wanted to see.

"And that," said Harry pointing at the dot that was labeled Lord Voldemort, "Is why I need this map."

Everyone looked at one another with dawning. Voldemort was in his chair in Harry's classroom, obviously waiting for Harry to come back.

"He's waiting for you, Professor," said Cindy.

"Doesn't matter," said Harry. He tapped the map. "Mischief managed," he said and the map went blank again.

"But--"

“Sean,” said Harry. “I’ll simply apparate right to my room and he can sit there all night for all I care.”

The students laughed.

Harry put the map into his pocket.

“Er, Professor,” said Stan.

“What is it, Stan?” said Harry.

“Um, er,” said Stan, who dropped his eyes to the floor.

Harry frowned at him and looked at Sean.

“We were just wondering, Sir,” said Sean. “If you wouldn’t mind coming to practice tomorrow night.”

“Practice?” said Harry, looking from one to the other.

“Quidditch, Professor,” said Stan, looking braver now. “Sean said that you said you could still do the dive and we were hoping – er – well – that you might show us.”

“You know, Professor,” said Sean. “Give us a few tips. You’re still a Gryffindor.”

Harry hated showing off, but the thought of flying around Hogwarts’ Quidditch stadium again almost made his chest hurt. Harry couldn’t help his smile.

“You want me to come to practice?” said Harry.

“Yes, Sir,” said Stan. “Would you?”

“What time?” said Harry.

Both of them seemed to perk up. “7:00?” said Stan hesitantly.

“Seven it is,” said Harry. He glanced at Sean who was practically beaming. “I’ll be there.”

Harry apparated to his room and fell on his bed. Quidditch at Hogwarts again. Harry didn't think he would ever feel this way again.

But the next evening when Harry walked toward the stadium with Hermione he got a big surprise.

"I thought this was only a practice," said Harry, noting all the people in the stands. They weren't full, but there were a staggering number of people waiting.

"Oh stop it, Harry," said Hermione. "Famous Harry Potter is going to take the Quidditch field with the Gryffindor team again. Of course people are going to come and see it."

Harry sent her an ungrateful look but she only laughed at him.

They stepped up to the team. Stan and Sean looked at him beaming with pleasure.

"Thank you so much for coming, Professor," said Stan. He glanced down at Harry's Firebolt, which was clutched in Harry's hand.

Harry held it up. "Yes I still use it," said Harry. "I don't care what people say about the Nimbus Magnum, the Firebolt is still the best."

Stan looked appalled. As if he had just insulted Harry, but Sean laughed.

Harry looked at Sean and smiled. "Getting used to my warped sense of humor, Sean?"

"Yes, Sir," said Sean. He mounted his broom. "Shall we?"

Sean pushed off the ground and soared off around the stadium. Harry looked at Hermione.

"Go on, Harry," said Hermione. "This is fun, remember."

Harry threw his leg over his broom and smiled at her. "Thanks, Hermione."

She kissed his cheek and Harry took off.

The minute Harry felt the air brushing by him, over him, through his hair, he forgot about everything else. He truly felt he was back where he belonged. He knew this stadium like the back of his hand and he raced around it just the way he did when he was Seeker.

“Professor!”

Harry stopped dead.

Apparently too fast because Sean went whizzing by him and had to come back to where Harry hovered about 50 feet about the ground. The other team members were starting to go through several tactics below them.

“How did you stop so fast?” said Sean breathlessly.

Sean was going to plug him for information. Well, Harry guessed he was a teacher. Why not.

“Is that your broom or one of the schools?” said Harry.

“It’s mine,” said Sean.

Harry looked at it. Nimbus 2001. Perfectly good broom.

“Ok, you have to think stop, and gently, and I mean gently, pull on the stick,” said Harry.

“And it’ll stop that fast?” said Sean.

“Quick, gentle but firm,” said Harry. “Watch.” Harry put one finger on the stick in front of him. *Down*. He gave the stick a gentle but firm push. His broom dropped a perfect 2 feet.

“Cool,” said Sean.

“You try.”

He did. Sean ended up dropping but at an angle.

“Balance is the key,” said Harry. “You’ll never be able to do that dive without the balance.”

"Teach me," begged Sean.

Harry looked at him. His blue/green eyes were wide with wonder. Harry was hit with such a sense of pride. Was this what it felt like to teach a son? Harry had been so worried about being a father, it almost made him sick. Damn it, he just may be able to do it.

"All right," said Harry. "First, let go of the broom."

Harry watched Sean let go. The broom wavered a little.

"Feel where your balance is, Sean. Find where your spot is on the broom."

Sean shifted a few times until he could let go of the broom without it fluctuating.

"Very good," said Harry. "That's your center. Make note of it so you can mount it there."

Sean nodded.

"Now try the drop again," said Harry.

Sean did and the broom dropped perfectly.

"Wow, did you see that?" said Sean breathlessly.

"Yes, Sean," said Harry, smiling. "Let's try the stop. Keep up with me and stop when I do."

"I'll try."

Harry raced across the stadium, Sean beside him a little behind to the right. Harry stopped. Sean didn't. A few moments later, Sean was before him.

"I think I did something wrong."

"Balance," said Harry. "When you stop, pulling the broom handle up a little, lean forward to compensate."

They raced back up the other way (the other players still practicing beneath them).

This time when Harry stopped, Sean did too.

“Wow, it works,” said Sean.

“Just concentrate on the balance, Sean and everything else will come easy.”

“Well I doubt that, Professor,” said Sean, “But you’re a great teacher.”

Harry looked down at the field.

“Will you show me the dive?” said Sean.

Harry wasn’t sure if Sean’s balance was good enough for it. He bit his lip.

“No just show us,” said Sean. “I know I can’t handle it yet.”

“I haven’t seen the snitch yet,” said Harry, by way of an excuse.

“Stan hasn’t let it out yet,” said Sean. “He was giving me time to pick your brain.”

Harry laughed at that one.

Sean swung down a few feet. “STAN!” he shouted. “LET THE SNITCH OUT.”

Harry saw the golden ball buzz around for a minute then disappear.

“This is your catch, Professor,” said Sean. “I’m just going to watch.”

“Sean, the snitch may not even dive,” said Harry.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Sean. “I still want to be able to tell my children that I saw Harry Potter catch the Snitch.”

Harry smirked at him. "All right," said Harry. "But the next one is yours. I want to be able to tell my children that I saw Sean McIves catch the Snitch."

"Deal, Professor," said Sean.

Harry reached out to take his hand but the snitch whizzed by him. Harry spun so fast he was sure Sean was going to fall off his broom. He didn't so Harry raced after the Snitch.

There was a gasp from the crowd as the snitch did indeed dive. Harry didn't notice that everyone on the field had stopped to watch. His concentration was on the ball with the fluttering gold wings. The ground was coming up fast. Still the Snitch dove.

I've got you. Thought Harry.

The Snitch turned even with the ground.

Harry jumped up onto his broom and pulled the handle up. A foot above the ground, Harry was still right behind the snitch. He let go of the handle and stood up. He was almost there. Reaching out, Harry dove, grabbed the snitch and somersaulted onto the ground. Rising with the snitch in his hand, he held out the other and summoned his broom back.

He then became aware that the crowd in the stands had erupted with applause. Harry looked around and felt himself going red.

"That was great, Professor," said Sean skidding to stop next to him. "I wish I could do that."

Harry shrugged looking at the ground. Again, he couldn't break the habit of a lifetime. In this case – embarrassment.

Hermione came up to them with Stan. "See, I was right, he's all embarrassed again," said Hermione.

"Professor, that was great," said Sean. "I can't wait until my balance is good enough to do that."

“I’m sure it’ll be soon,” said Harry, trying to ignore the crowd.

“Harry was born with it,” said Hermione. “The first year we were here, he could do it.”

“Hermione,” said Harry. He turned to the boys. “I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

Harry left the field. He still felt that thrill from speeding toward the snitch and catching it. It just felt different.

Harry felt the burn on his head.

“What’s the matter, Harry?” said Voldemort. “You’ve proven you can still do that little dive of yours. Why so melancholy?”

“Please go away, Voldemort,” said Harry. “I don’t feel like talking.”

“Something is bothering you,” said Voldemort. “Tell me.”

Harry was silent as he moved through the castle. Voldemort was still with him. It wasn’t until Harry reached his classroom that Voldemort moved in front of him to stop him. Harry knew better than to try to go through him.

“Harry, tell me what’s wrong,” said Voldemort.

Harry stared at the floor, thinking of all he had missed as a child. By all rights, Harry should have enjoyed playing Quidditch with the kids. He should have loved showing off and taken pride in teaching them. All Harry felt was embarrassment.

The small pleasure he had in chasing and catching the snitch was erased by the fact that he was a man now. He wanted desperately to be able to play with the kids but no one had ever showed him. He had no example. He tried to recall the feeling he had when he had taught Sean to balance on his broom, but it wouldn’t surface.

I’m going to make a lousy father.

Harry stepped around Voldemort. Voldemort didn't let him. He grabbed Harry's face. Harry stared up into Voldemort's eyes, the pain in his eyes much more than physical as he slid to his knees.

"Self-pity does not become you, Harry," said Voldemort seriously.

Harry tore his gaze from Voldemort's. "You don't understand," said Harry softly.

"Don't I?" said Voldemort.

All right, maybe Voldemort did. "Please let go of me," said Harry.

"Harry, remember what I told you in your 7th year?" said Voldemort. "That if I took everything so seriously that I wouldn't be able to enjoy my power?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"I told you to enjoy life," said Voldemort. "You *are* allowed to play, Harry."

Chapter 5

Friendship and Family Ties

Harry felt better the next day mostly because most of the students who had seen him play didn't go on and on about the dive. But they did tell him how Sean kept boasting about what a good flying teacher Harry was, and about how much he'd learned.

Sean and Stan had also begged him to come to the next practice, swearing they wouldn't tell anyone. Harry finally caved in (although he didn't put up much of a fight) and agreed.

It was the end of the day on Friday and Harry sat at his desk in his classroom. He would have preferred to sit in his office but it was too small and if Voldemort came in, it would be too painful in the confined area.

His Lesson plans were finished for the next week, so he found himself again staring at his letter to Ginger. How was he going to tell her?

"What are you doing, Harry?" said Voldemort from his chair across the room.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" said Harry.

"Well, judging by that tormented expression," said Voldemort. "I'd say you were still trying to figure out how to tell your wife about me."

Voldemort dematerialized then re-materialized behind Harry. Harry's hand hit his scar.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," muttered Harry.

Voldemort chuckled, leaning over his shoulder. "I see I was right."

"You know everything, Voldemort, so why do you bother to ask?" said Harry. "And would you mind not reading over my shoulder. You've all ready given me a headache."

Harry felt Voldemort straighten behind him.

"So why haven't you told her, Harry?" said Voldemort.

"You know why."

"But I don't," said Voldemort. "It seems to me, she'll be angrier that you didn't tell her rather than about the fact that I'm haunting you."

"I don't want to upset her," said Harry.

"And you don't think she'll be upset and angry when she does find out?"

"I'd just as soon make it later than sooner," grumbled Harry.

"But she is your wife," said Voldemort. "She has a right to know, especially since, as our contract states, after she gives birth, I can go to your house if you are there."

"Don't remind me, Voldemort," said Harry. "I remember quite clearly what I agreed to."

"So tell her, Harry," said Voldemort. "Before she finds out on her own."

Voldemort sounded so smug, Harry got angry. "Look," said Harry, standing up and turning around at the same time. "This is none of-"

Voldemort grabbed Harry's face and Harry gasped in pain. "Have you lost your temper with me, my son?"

Harry leaned on the desk to keep himself on his feet as he stared into Voldemort's eyes.

Voldemort looked away briefly then turned back to Harry with a very satisfied looking smile.

"Do come in, Mrs. Potter," said Voldemort.

Harry swallowed hard. Voldemort held his chin firmly but out of the corner of his eye, he saw his wife stepping further into the room.

Harry could bet she'd been standing there for a while and Voldemort had known - which was the reason for all the questions.

Harry legs were getting too weak to hold him.

"That wasn't very nice," rasped Harry.

Voldemort stared hard at Harry. "So who ever said I was nice?" said Voldemort.

"Don't look at me," said Ginny.

Voldemort chuckled.

"Let go of him, Voldemort," said Ginny.

Voldemort simply let go and Harry hit the floor.

Voldemort turned to Ginny. "You look radiant my dear," said Voldemort. "How is Harry treating you?"

Ginny ignored him and rushed around the desk. She put an arm around Harry as he pushed to his hands and knees.

"Harry, how could you keep this from me?" said Ginny.

"How could I not," said Harry softly.

Ginny helped him into his chair. "Damn it, Harry, you're not alone anymore."

"I know, Ginger," said Harry. "I'm sorry. It's just-"

"Don't even go there, Harry," said Ginny. "I said for better or worse." She sent Voldemort a glare. "Even if *he* always makes it worse."

Voldemort chuckled. "I always did like you, Ginny," said Voldemort.

Ginny stood up and faced him. "You - out. I want to talk to my husband."

Voldemort's expression altered. "Careful, Girl," said Voldemort, his tone menacing. "As you can see, I can still touch him. I can still put him in agony. Do not provoke me."

"Yes, well, I will hear all the whys before I leave," said Ginny. "So kindly leave us alone."

"Not in the contract, my dear," said Voldemort. "I don't have to."

Ginny looked at Harry who looked away. "Another contract?" said Ginny. "Great." Ginny continued to look at Harry who still had his hand pressed to his scar. She must have realized he was still in pain.

She looked around. "Rowan," she called out.

"Harry," said Voldemort.

"I didn't call her," said Harry with a grin. "Ginger did."

Rowan soared into the room, looking tired (she had been busy since Voldemort's return), and Voldemort vanished. Rowan landed on Harry's chest and cried his pain away.

When he looked up at his wife there wasn't a pleasant look on her normally angelic features.

"Ginger-"

"Spit it out, Harry," snapped Ginny. "I want to hear all of it."

Harry sighed and told her everything. They were joined over dinner by Hermione who helped gloss over some of it. They had finished the meal and Hermione and Ginny were discussing courses of action when Nagini slithered in.

Great. "*What is it?*" Harry asked the snake.

"*The master is very annoyed with Mrs. Potter,*" said Nagini.

"Oh?" said Harry.

"Yes. The master made you tell her your secret but she was not appreciative," said Nagini.

"Meaning," said Harry.

"The master thinks she should tell you her secret."

"Her secret?" said Harry, puzzled.

"Yes, the one she is hiding from you."

Harry blinked at the snake and turned to Ginny. "You're keeping something from me, Ginger?"

Ginny looked at the snake with sudden alarm. "What did she tell you?" said Ginny.

Harry told them.

"Oh, dear," said Hermione. "Voldemort knows."

"What does he know that I don't," demanded Harry.

Ginny bit her lip. "Oh, Harry."

Harry sent Rowan out of the room and called Voldemort. When he appeared, Harry demanded again, "What's going on?"

"Harry, think," said Voldemort. "Didn't you notice that when I forced you to sign the documents I said it was for the heirs?"

"Yes, but Ginny comes from a large family," said Harry. "We're bound to have-" Harry cut himself off and looked at his wife. The heir was the first born and Voldemort had used the plural form. George and Fred were Ginny's brothers... Harry stood up.

"TWINS," he nearly shouted.

Ginny bit her lip again.

Astounded, Harry stared down at her. Not one, but two. He paced away running a hand through his hair.

Voldemort chuckled at his reaction. "An heir for Gryffindor and an heir for Slytherin, Harry," said Voldemort. "The prophesy working once more."

Harry ignored Voldemort. "Why didn't you tell me?" Harry asked his wife.

"If you saw your face just then, you'd know why," said Ginny stubbornly.

"But something that important-"

"Oh," challenged Ginny, "And being haunted by the century's most evil dark lord isn't important?"

Harry's jaw dropped open but he couldn't respond. Guilt converged on him again. Because of him now his entire family would be plagued by the nuisance that was Voldemort.

"But," said Harry.

"You're worried enough," Ginny went on. "You wouldn't even go to the opening feast because I had an upset stomach."

Harry was at a complete loss. Ginny had had brothers - people she loved and who loved her all her life to argue with. Harry had had no one.

He had never had a serious row with Ginny. Harry had every right to be angry but couldn't seem to get over his guilt. And Ginny wasn't finished with him.

"Damn it, Harry," said Ginny. "Why must you-"

Ginny clamped her mouth closed as Voldemort went directly to Harry and pushed his hand to Harry forehead.

Harry hit the ground as a scream tore out of him, echoed by a scream from both Hermione and Ginny.

Ginny fell to the floor next to Harry and wrapped her arms around him.

"I told you, girl," said Voldemort. "Do not provoke me."

Ginny looked up at him, stammering. "I-I didn't."

"But you did," said Voldemort. "You pushed Harry into a corner of his own guilt. Harry doesn't know how to argue with people he loves. You provoked me by hurting my son."

"Then why punish Harry?"

"He is not suffering from the trauma of your guilt, right now," said Voldemort. "Is he?"

"Harry," cried Ginny.

Harry couldn't speak. The pain had hit so quickly, it had shocked his system.

"Rowan," shouted Ginny.

Harry shut his eyes. Voldemort had just provocation. Rowan couldn't come.

"Rowan!" shouted Ginny again.

"She can't come," said Voldemort. "Harry knows it. Will you let him bleed to death?"

Gasping through tears, Ginny sneered, "I despise you."

"Help Harry," said Voldemort simply.

Ginny scrambled to her feet and dashed into the hall screaming for help. Hermione settled next to Harry, pressing some sort of cloth to his head.

"I'm sorry, Harry," said Voldemort.

"I know, Voldemort," said Harry weakly. "But you were right. I can take it from you. I can't take it from her."

Voldemort nodded. "Call Rowan, Harry. I will concede."

"You never fight with me or Ron, either," said Hermione.

Blackness was converging on Harry and he still felt the blood flowing down his face. "I can't contest," rasped Harry. "You were provoked by my wife and punished me on my own behalf. You're still protecting me, aren't you?"

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "You are still my son."

Harry heard the sound of pounding feet.

"Please move away from him," cried Ginny.

Voldemort drifted back a few meters. "Do you understand now, Mrs. Potter?"

"Yes, I understand," said Ginny. "You're still a monster."

Harry cried out as he was moved to a stretcher.

"Oh, Harry," cried Ginny.

Severus was pressing something to Harry's scar as Hermione tried to wipe the blood off his face.

"Think hard, Ginny," said Voldemort. "When you figure it out, Harry can contest his punishment and call Rowan."

Ginny stood up again and looked at Voldemort. She opened her mouth but closed it again as Voldemort moved closer to Harry.

"Who has Harry fought with, Ginny?"

"He's fought with Ron," said Ginny.

"Has he?" said Voldemort. "You've heard them argue?"

"Well no," said Ginny. "They didn't speak to one another."

Voldemort nodded. "And what happened when Harry argued with the Dursleys?"

"I don't know."

"I believe he was locked up and starved," said Voldemort.

Ginny gasped with what sounded like horror. Harry turned his face away.

"Wait, Severus," Voldemort told him as he moved Harry's stretcher.

"And Sirius," Voldemort quizzed Ginny.

"Harry doesn't argue with Sirius."

"Correct," said Voldemort. "Who does he argue with?"

"Only you," said Ginny her eyes narrowing.

"And what happens?"

"You put him in agony," cried Ginny.

"And what about Hermione?"

"He never-" Ginny stopped, her voice softening. "He won't fight with people he cares about."

"Very good, Ginny," said Voldemort. "Harry grew up not truly caring for anyone. Now he has people he cares for. He won't fight with them. He doesn't want to lose what he never had. He'd rather-"

"He'd rather suffer," squeaked Ginny.

"Yes, Ginny," said Voldemort.

"You did that for him," whispered Ginny.

"Yes," said Voldemort. "He can take it from me. He can't take it from you."

Ginny leaned over Harry. "Oh, Harry. I'm so sorry," cried Ginny. "I'm so stupid. You're so stupid. If you think you could lose me, you're deluded. I love you, you idiot."

Harry couldn't see her face but could hear the emotion in her voice. He closed his eyes.

"I'll just have to learn to put up with my in-laws."

Voldemort chuckled. Harry snorted on his own laugh and groaned as pain tremored through him.

"But," said Ginny. "I have every right to try to argue with my husband with or without your interference, Voldemort. So I contest you punishing him."

Voldemort drifted across the classroom. "I concede."

He vanished and Ginny called Rowan. She came.

Rowan, now at the end of her cycle wasn't a full strength. She was able to stop the bleeding, restore his sight and take most of Harry's pain away but Harry was still weak as he entered his class Monday morning.

The class took one look at him and groaned.

"It wasn't anything one of us said, was it?" said Cindy.

"No," said Harry, sitting down at his desk. "My wife visited this weekend." Harry sighed. "I hadn't told her about Voldemort yet. She was a tad miffed."

Several boys laughed.

"Well I should think so," huffed Missy.

"Wait a minute," said Sean. "She provoked him and he punished you?"

"Yes," said Harry. "I'm the only one he can hurt, remember."

"That's not fair," said Dawn.

"So who ever said I was fair," said Voldemort as he materialized in his chair in the back.

Harry flinched.

"Then why-" started Missy.

"It's obvious," said Cindy, cutting her off.

Voldemort chuckled. "That girl is so much like Hermione it's almost annoying."

Harry leaned back in his chair and smiled. The class glared at Cindy who frowned, turning red.

"Cindy, I'd take that as a compliment," said Harry. "Voldemort knows Professor Weasley can run rings around his semantics games." Voldemort stood up and Harry held up a hand. "Please, Voldemort," said Harry. "You know it's true for the most part and you've already done enough damage."

Voldemort studied him. "You are still in pain." Voldemort stated the obvious.

Harry sighed. "Rowan did what she could."

Voldemort sat down. "All right, Harry."

Harry turned back to Cindy. "So tell us. Why did he punish me?" quizzed Harry.

"Well, I would think it's Voldemort's threat of torture manipulation."

"Go on," said Harry.

"She is your wife," reasoned Cindy. "I doubt she would like to see you in - well, like that. By her knowing he can do that to you, he can control her."

Voldemort chuckled. "Very good, Miss Larsen."

"Well that sucks," said Missy.

Voldemort laughed outright.

"Then I'm right," said Cindy.

"Yes," said Harry. "And although it does indeed suck, my wife has a strong character and a solid constitution."

"She needs it to be Mrs. Harry Potter," said Voldemort.

Harry ignored the remark. "She's also never feared Voldemort."

"Hmm, yes," muttered Voldemort. "Courageous little chit. Always yelling at me on Harry's behalf."

The class laughed at his grumbling tone and Harry smiled.

"Complaining, Voldemort," said Harry.

Voldemort stared back at Harry with seriousness. "Oh, no, Harry," said Voldemort. "I doubt she'll do it again now."

But Harry kept smiling. "Oh, I don't know. Ginger loves good repartee too."

Voldemort sent Harry a challenging grin. "I'll look forward to it then."

"I'm sure you will."

"Did she come for a reason?" said Voldemort. "Or was it a social visit?"

"Does my wife need an excuse to see me?" said Harry indignantly.

Voldemort chuckled and smirked at him. "Nice try, Harry."

Harry shook his head in surrender and held up his arm. "She brought me my watch. I left it home the last time I was there."

"She came all the way here to bring you a watch?" said Cindy with surprise. Then she dropped her gaze. "Er. Sorry, Professor."

Harry looked at her. "It's all right," said Harry. "It does sound extreme but this watch is special." He sent Sean a glance. "It was made by the same people who created the Marauder's Map."

While several of the students who were in the common room started whispering, Voldemort spoke up.

"Really? Do tell us," said Voldemort.

Harry was sure the last thing Voldemort wanted to hear about was his father and Sirius. "Let's just say," said Harry. "That with the right commands, this watch will voice several opinions on whatever they think the wearer should be doing at that particular time."

"Complete waste of time, if you ask me," said Voldemort.

"Oh?" Damn Harry's curiosity. "Why is that?"

Voldemort chuckled. "Because, my boy, the only opinion that matters is mine, of course."

Harry laughed – had to, but a knock on the door stopped Harry from responding.

"Come in," said Harry.

Remus Lupin entered the room and crossed it, looking ill and tired.

"Ah, hello, Remus," said Voldemort.

Remus stopped and sent him a surprised glance. He sighed. "I had hoped Sirius was playing a nasty joke on me," Remus said to Harry.

"Tell me about it," said Harry.

Harry introduced Professor Remus Lupin as the best DADA teacher Harry had had at Hogwarts and announced that Remus would be teaching with Harry for the next few days.

"Why?" said Sean.

"Why indeed," said Voldemort, knowingly.

"Voldemort please," said Harry. "It's a surprise. Play along with us."

Voldemort stared at Harry. "At what concession?"

Harry sighed. "Must you be so difficult?"

"Oh, but I must," said Voldemort. "What do you offer?"

"What do you want?"

"Is everything a negotiation with him?" said Remus.

"Usually," said Harry. "But I think he has something specific in mind right now."

"How well you know me, Harry."

"So what is it?" said Harry.

"You will let me visit Ginny one day this week," said Voldemort. "To see this repartee of hers."

Harry considered it. Ginger could take it. It would actually help and she would insist on it.

Harry looked at Remus. "Wednesday," they both said.

Voldemort nodded knowingly. "I understand," said Voldemort. "Very well, Harry. I will play along."

Remus paced the front of the class. "I will be teaching you about boggarts, dementors and werewolves."

The class groaned.

"We already covered them," said Sean.

"Have you faced any of them?" said Remus.

The class looked at one another.

"Er. No," said Missy.

"Well Professor Potter found a boggart, so you will all fight it first hand." He turned to Harry. "Are you sure your strong enough for this?" said Remus.

"Yes," said Harry.

"Where is it?" said Remus.

"Staff room again," said Harry. "Annoying the hell out of Snape."

Remus laughed. "Too bad Neville isn't here."

Reminded of Neville, Harry decided he would definitely go to Hogsmeade over the weekend.

Harry got up as Remus directed the class to the door.

"I don't suppose I could persuade you to stay here," said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. "And miss our favorite class fighting a boggart," said Voldemort. "Harry, don't be so silly."

Which meant no.

"Just keep your distance, then," said Harry.

"Will you beg me?"

Harry sighed. "I'm asking."

Voldemort smiled. "All right, Harry."

They all entered the empty staff room and Remus quizzed them all on what would happen when the boggart came out. They all knew that it would change into whatever the person facing it feared most.

They all knew the spell (ridikulous) to fight it and Remus told them that they would all get the chance to face it.

"Now when it gets to Professor Potter," Remus said and looked to Harry. "Are you sure you're-"

"Remus, give me a break," said Harry.

"What is the problem?" said Voldemort, sounding bored. "Harry isn't afraid of anything. I certainly never scared him. What could it change into? His wife?"

"Very funny, Voldemort," said Harry.

Remus went on. "As I was saying, when it gets to Professor Potter, it will turn into a dementor."

"A dementor?" said Voldemort interested again. "Oh, Harry, I'm impressed."

"Why is that impressive," said Missy.

"My dear girl," said Voldemort. "It is impressive because it means that what Harry fears most is fear itself."

The class looked at him. Thankfully, Remus continued.

"Professor Potter will show you at that point, the way to fight a dementor," said Remus.

"Harry has a strong patronus?" said Voldemort.

"Yes, Voldemort," said Remus. "It charged off 100 dementors in his third year."

"Really? One Hundred? His third year?" said Voldemort.

Remus looked up. "Yes," said Remus. "Why are you so surprised? You know how powerful he is."

"Well yes, but at 13..."

"Can we get on with this," said Harry self-consciously, trying not to notice how the class was looking at him again.

Harry watched the boggart change into various scary monsters and giant insects which the students all made to look silly.

"Ready, Harry?" said Remus.

"Yes," said Harry, moving forward. The boggart turned to him and changed. Cold filled the room.

Harry heard his mother pleading but waited. He heard her screams.

"Now, Harry," said Remus. "Finish it."

Harry raised his hand. "*Expecto Patronum*," said Harry. The silver stag erupted from his hand and charged toward the dementor/boggart who tripped over his robe.

The sight of the monstrous and menacing creature falling over its feet was funny and the class laughed. The boggart exploded into a waft of smoke.

"All right, Harry?" said Remus.

"Remus," said Harry with exasperation.

"For heaven's sake," said Voldemort. "What is the fuss? What happens when Harry comes across a dementor?"

"You don't want to know, Voldemort," said Harry. "Believe me. You don't."

"But I do," said Voldemort. "Remus must know."

"Remus knows because I didn't understand why they effected me worse than anyone else," said Harry. "I used to pass out. He taught me the patronus spell."

"Tell me, Harry."

"No, Voldemort," said Harry as they all went back to the DADA classroom.

"I'm asking, Harry."

"Will you beg me?" said Harry with a grin.

"I'll wager Miss Larsen has figured it out," said Voldemort.

Harry sent Cindy a glance. She looked like she was deep in thought. "Maybe," said Harry with a shrug.

"She'll tell me," said Voldemort. "But I'd rather hear it from you."

The class took their seats and Harry fell into his chair behind his desk.

"I said no, Voldemort," said Harry.

Voldemort drifted over to Cindy. "Miss Larsen?" said Voldemort.

"I have no idea what could be so bad that Professor Potter would pass out," said Cindy but she ruined her ignorant comment with a sweet smile.

"Ah, so your class is loyal as well," said Voldemort.

Thankfully, the bell rang. The class left, talking about the boggart and the dementor. Voldemort followed them.

"Where are you going, Voldemort?" said Harry.

"Your second year Ravenclaws are coming, Harry," said Voldemort. "I'm going to play with Hermione's Slytherins."

"Why don't I believe you?" said Harry, distractedly playing with the chain around his neck.

Voldemort chuckled and vanished.

Harry sighed.

"So, I'll see you Wednesday night," said Remus.

Harry turned to him but Remus' eyes were on the medallion Harry was absently running along its chain.

"What's that?" said Remus.

Harry shrugged, looking down at it. "Just an old piece of jewelry. I've had it for years."

He remembered Voldemort's comment when he noticed Harry wearing it.

I knew you'd favor this one.

Remus took the gold phoenix medallion from Harry's grasp and looked down at it. At the angle he held it, the gem stone eyes, one red, one green, appeared to glow.

"I've never seen you wear this before."

Harry took it from Remus' fingers and dropped it back under his robe. "I normally wear it under my shirt," said Harry simply.

The second year students started filing in.

"Why?" said Remus.

Harry pulled out his notes for his class and leaned over his desk. "Why?" echoed Harry, unwilling to actually admit that it reminded him of a happy holiday.

"Because it's a nice piece," said Remus looking impressed. "It does look old."

Harry pulled it back out and looked at it. The detail was exquisite and the inscription on the back appeared to be a very archaic looking imprint.

"Have you ever have it translated?" said Remus.

Harry looked back up. "Hm? What?" said Harry, frowning.

Remus nodded toward the medallion. "The markings. Did you ever have them translated?"

Harry's frown got worse. "Translated?"

Remus laughed softly. "Getting dense, are we? Translated from whatever language it's in."

"You can't read this?" said Harry, holding it up.

Remus' smile vanished. "Can you?"

"Of course," said Harry. "It says," Harry looked down at the pendant and read, "*If truth is timeless, death is a deception.*"

Remus quickly pulled it away from Harry to look at it again. "Harry, where did you get this?"

Harry gently took the medallion back and dropped it again under his robe. "Why?" said Harry defensively.

"Because you just hissed at me," said Remus, still looking alarmed. "It's obviously written in Parseltongue."

Harry blinked. Parseltongue? It made sense to Harry. "Voldemort gave it—"

"Voldemort!"

Remus lowered his voice as the students had gone deathly quiet at his outburst.

"Harry, you—"

"Remus, relax," said Harry, now exasperated again. He had to stop him before Remus went into protector mode again. "I told you. I've had it for years. It's just a medallion."

Remus didn't look convinced.

"I'll see you Wednesday," said Harry, gesturing at his class. "I have to teach."

"Has Hermione seen it?"

"Remus."

"I'm going, I'm going," said Remus. "But have it checked out, ok?"

"Yeah, yeah," said Harry, waving as Remus finally nodded and left.

With a sigh, Harry turned back to the class.

On Wednesday evening, Harry arranged to have his 6 year Gryffindors meet him in one of the tower classrooms. He had originally wanted to have all his elder student present, but Albus had told him it would be too dangerous with that many present, so he was forced to pick one class. Since he had started with his Gryffindors, he felt obligated to finish it with them.

Harry stood back and gave Remus the floor. They talked a little about how the boggart/dementor made them all feel then he began talking about werewolves.

He explained wolfsbane to them but he wasn't really telling them anything they hadn't learned before. When they started to look bored, Harry stepped forward.

"What would you do if you met a wizard who happened to be a werewolf once a month?" said Harry.

"Run," said Rufus. The class snickered.

Harry shook his head at them. "Seriously."

Missy raised her hand and Harry nodded at her.

"Well, it really isn't their fault, right, having been bitten. And, well, if they take the wolfsbane, then they're safe to humans," said Missy.

"Go on," said Harry.

"Well, unless the person is a complete git, then what's the problem?"

Harry nodded. "Right, but being a 'complete git' is a human characteristic. So you would judge the werewolf on its human characteristics?" quizzed Harry.

"Oh course," said Missy. "An animal can't help what it is."

"Can't it?" said Harry.

A very large, black dog sprang into the room, snarling and growling. It bared it's teeth at Remus.

The class was alarmed for only a minute.

"Everyone knows that is Sirius Black," said Sean. "He's not going to hurt anyone."

"Fargo, sit," said Sirius as he strode into the class room. He looked at the class. "What was that?"

"Hello, Sirius," said Harry. "Have you met my godfather?" Harry said to the class.

Harry watched as they absorbed the information with open mouths. Their eyes moved to the large dog, who had not moved and was still in an aggressive stance in front of Remus.

Remus Lupin had not moved a muscle.

"All animals can be trained and controlled," said Harry. "Fargo is an Auror dog."

"An Auror dog," gasped Cindy, her eyes snapping to Remus with dawning.

"Fargo, retreat," was called from the doorway.

The dog immediately turned and padded towards the door, where an Auror stood beside Snape.

"Thanks, Tonks," called Harry to a woman with hair a horrid shade of pink and she and the dog left.

Severus Snape entered the room holding a goblet and Harry turned back to the class.

"A werewolf is a magical beast," Harry reminded them. "It can not be trained or controlled. The wolfsbane makes it somewhat docile and other animals can moderate it's temperament. But it is still a wild creature."

Severus smirked as he continued into the room. "Not one of your brighter ideas, Potter," said Snape, holding the cup out to Remus.

Remus drank it quickly, trying not to choke too badly on the taste as Snape glanced around. "And where is the Dark Lord?" said Severus. "I'd have thought he'd be very interested in this."

"He's visiting Mrs. Potter," said Sirius. He looked over at Harry. "She's fine by the way."

"I know," said Harry. "I checked on her after dinner."

Harry noticed that everyone was looking around, puzzled. Everyone except Cindy, Harry noted with satisfaction. Her eyes never left Remus.

"So, what's the surprise?" Sean finally asked.

The cloud cover outside the window drifted and moonlight streamed in.

Remus had gone rigid and began to shake. With an eerie snarling sound, he began to change. The class gasped as he hit the floor on all fours, his shoulders hunching and his head lengthening.

The room was deathly silent until the transformation was complete. Then the werewolf circled a small spot of the floor beside the desk in front of the room and laid down.

Sirius transformed and padded over to the wolf and laid down as well.

Everyone started to talk at once and Harry quickly quieted the class down.

"I want you all to understand that Professor Lupin didn't have to do this," said Harry. "It is a terrible burden. It isn't the same as being an animagus."

"Show them, Potter," said Severus.

Harry looked over at Snape who nodded. With a sigh, Harry climbed onto the desk. The class looked on curiously.

Harry dove off the desk and transformed.

The class gasped as the black hawk with piercing green eyes and a silver lightening bolt shaped streak on it's head circled the room.

"Professor Potter is an animagus?" said Sean.

"Obviously," retorted Cindy.

Harry landed back on the desk and transformed again so he was sitting on the desk as he normally did.

"Wow, Professor," said Rufus. "That was-"

Harry held up his hand for quiet.

"That was choice," said Harry. "I can change at will and it is painless. And I can hear and understand what goes on around me." He looked down at the wolf and the dog then back to the class. "Professor Lupin has no choice and it is very painful, which is why I stressed that he didn't have to show you tonight. As you can see," Harry gestured at the animals on the floor, "the wolfsbane has made him safe for humans, but it wasn't always an option.

"Mr. Black, my father and Peter Pettigrew all secretly became unregistered animagi to be with him during these time because they called him friend, because they cared.

"Tell me," Harry bade them, "What does this tell you?"

The class was quiet for a few minutes and Harry let them think.

"It's not what you appear to be but what's inside that is important," said Missy.

"That's a start," said Harry.

"Being yourself isn't always easy," said Philby Tompkins, a small, quiet boy, who rarely spoke up in class.

Harry stared at the boy. "That is most definitely true and although relevant, not what I'm getting."

Cindy's hand shot up. The class groaned but Harry smiled.

“Go ahead, Cindy,” said Harry.

“It’s about friendship – loyalty,” said Cindy.

“Go on,” said Harry.

“Well, look at the dog – I mean Mr. Black,” said Cindy, trying to vocalize her thoughts. “And well, when Voldemort first appeared here Mr. Weasley came right away and Professor Weasley – once she understood, well...”

“Go on.”

“If you have friends...”

Cindy seemed to be faltering for words. Sean finished for her.

“No matter what happens, you’re never alone.”

Harry nodded at them with seriousness. “Yes. Take a look around. See – know who you can trust.” Harry looked over the class and he couldn’t help thinking of Draco, wondering why he hadn’t come. He had sworn he’d be there.

Totally overlooking the fact that Draco had no way of knowing that Harry could use his help, Harry felt hurt. His hand closed around the medallion through his robe.

Harry shook it off. Draco *had* been there when it mattered, he reminded himself.

“That,” Harry went on to the class, “Friendship, can sometimes be the best defense against the Dark Arts.”

Chapter 6

Memories and Semantics

Harry walked down the main street of Hogsmeade. He had tried to get Hermione to come with him but she was tutoring that afternoon and didn't want to disappoint her students.

"Hey, Professor," said Sean McIves.

Harry glanced at him and Stan as they fell into step beside him. "Hello boys," said Harry. "Can I help you with something?"

"Just wondering what you're doing in town without Voldemort on your back," said Sean.

Since Voldemort had been conspicuously absent the last couple of days since he went to visit Ginger, Harry didn't laugh. He knew Voldemort wasn't at the house anymore but Harry didn't know where he was. "Just visiting a friend," said Harry.

"Mind if we tag along?" said Sean.

"Suit yourself," said Harry. "Although without Voldemort's charming presence, it's guaranteed to be boring."

The boys laughed as Harry opened the door to 'Grandma's Trunk.'

There were a fair amount of people inside, milling about. Harry scanned the shop until he spotted Neville behind a counter, cornered by a bunch of youth who, by the looks of them, were the local adolescences from the town who didn't have the talent or the means to go to Hogwarts.

Harry moved closer and then he heard them.

"I don't care what you believe," said Neville, picking up a statue and dusting it off with the rag in his hand. "He was - is - my friend."

"A couple old photographs," sneered one boy. "And your word, doesn't prove you even knew him."

Neville replaced the statue on the shelf and took the one next to it to dust. "Believe what ever you want," said Neville.

Harry had never heard Neville sound so self-confident or so nonplussed.

"So why hasn't he been here to see you then, Longbottom?" said another boy. "If he was your friend."

"Look," said Neville, still not looking up from his dusting. "Dealing with the most evil Dark Lord on the century takes a lot out of a person. I'm sure when Harry is settled in Hogwarts, he'll come to see me."

Neville didn't sound angry, insulted or even impatient - merely like he was stating a fact.

Harry had to smile because Neville was right. Harry was settled now and had come to see him.

"Hello, Neville," said Harry.

Neville dropped the statue he had been dusting and turned.

"Harry!"

Neville rushed around the counter and grabbed Harry into a hug. Harry hugged him back then held him away by the shoulders, looking him in the face.

"Neville, you look great," said Harry. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. Just fine," said Neville. "You?"

"I'll live," said Harry.

"Still the cynic, Harry?" said Neville.

Harry grinned at him. "Always."

Neville laughed.

"How's your grandmother?" said Harry.

“She’s fine,” came a shrill reply from the inner doorway.

Harry had only met Mrs. Longbottom a couple of times but she looked the same.

“Dropped off the face of the earth, did you boy?” said Mrs. Longbottom.

“Er, No, Mrs. L.,” said Harry. “First the trials, then the Ministry. I got married. My wife is expecting and now teaching and all...”

“Excuses,” muttered Mrs. Longbottom.

Harry walked over to her and looked at her squarely. “Choices, Mrs. L.,” said Harry.

Mrs. Longbottom laughed then hugged him. “I’ll make some tea, Harry. Visit with Neville.”

Harry turned back to Neville and Mrs. Longbottom left the shop. Neville rolled his eyes. “I wish you would teach me how to do that, Harry,” said Neville.

“What?” said Harry, glancing at some of the shelves.

“Never mind,” said Neville. “It’s just that you are the only one brave enough to stand up to my grandmother.”

“Yeah, well,” muttered Harry, still scanning some of the items on the shelves. “I had the Dursleys.”

“And Voldemort,” said Neville.

Harry shrugged. “This shop is great, Neville,” he said. “I thought you’d go into Herbology, but it looks like you’re doing well.”

“I do well enough,” said Neville. “And I do have a nursery out back – side shop. Only supplier of parmason in England. Drives Snape up the wall.”

Harry laughed. “Good for you.”

“So what brings you to town, Harry?” said Neville, going back behind the counter.

“You do,” said Harry, stepping to it. “One of my classes fought a boggart the other day and I immediately thought of you.” Harry leaned on the counter.

“I’m never going to live that down,” grumbled Neville.

Harry laughed. “Are you kidding?” said Harry. “That was the funniest thing I’ve seen in my life. The entire class will never forget it.”

Harry looked over the counter so he could see behind it. There was an open bottle of butterbeer on the shelf. He looked up Neville with a grin. “As I thought,” said Harry. “Got one for me? I’ve had your grandmother’s tea before.”

Neville smiled. “You know me too well, Harry.” He reached into another cabinet and took out another bottle. He handed it to Harry who opened it and took a sip.

Harry glanced at the boys then. They were still crowded around the counter, but they were staring at Harry with disbelief. That was one of the only things he didn’t mind about being famous, it was a perk for his friends.

He gestured at them. “Friends of yours?” said Harry.

“Sort of,” said Neville. “Regulars from town who come in to annoy me.”

“Got your own little gang of Voldemorts,” said Harry.

Neville laughed.

“Professor,” said Sean, stepping up to them (both boys had been looking around the shop). “Look at this?”

Harry looked down at the book Sean was holding. “What is it?”

“That’s our yearbook,” said Neville.

“Our yearbook?” said Harry incredulously. “We had a yearbook?”

“Didn’t you get one?” said Sean.

“I didn’t even know we had one,” said Harry, taking the book from Sean and flipping through it. Pictures of school mates around the halls and on the grounds, all the teachers, some of the ghosts. “Who took all these pictures? I know Colin couldn’t have done it all.”

“The house elves mostly,” said Neville. “I’m surprised Ron or Hermione didn’t buy you one. But then they were both pretty upset at the end of the year.”

Harry nodded distractedly noting all the people who had signed it. “Where can I get one?”

“Well you can probably order one through the school,” said Neville. “If they don’t have any extras. I think Lavender was in charge of ordering them for Gryffindor in our year. You can check with her.”

Harry nodded again. “Is this yours?” said Harry curiously as he came across a signature he didn’t expect.

“Yes,” said Neville. “I keep it on display because it’s such a conversation piece. Everyone wants to see it.”

“Draco Malfoy signed your yearbook?” said Harry.

Neville laughed. “Well I did save his life in potions that day,” said Neville.

Harry grinned at him and looked back down at the book. “You saved mine too that day, Neville.”

There was a group gasp from the boys and even Sean looked surprised.

“You tell them, Neville,” said Harry.

Neville relayed the tale of how their evil Potion Master had made Harry and Draco poison themselves in their fifth year and only Neville had the correct antidote.

“Have you heard from him?” said Neville.

Harry looked up from the book. “Who? Malfoy?”

“Yeah,” said Neville.

Harry shook his head. “Not since the trials,” said Harry, looking back down at the book.

Sean interrupted, pointing at a picture. “Is that your wife, Professor?”

It was a picture of Harry and Ginny by Hagrid’s hut. “Yes,” said Harry. Underneath the picture was a note in his wife’s handwriting.

I wish you as much happiness and love that I had. Virginia Weasley

“That’s so sad,” said Sean.

“Yes,” said Neville. “But then Harry was in a coma and the prognosis wasn’t good.”

Harry looked up at Neville. “Can I write in it?” said Harry.

“You want to sign my book?” said Neville with surprise.

“What kind of stupid question is that?” said Harry.

“But you hate all that publicity stuff,” said Neville.

Harry smirked at him. “This is a little different,” said Harry.

Neville handed him a quill and Harry leaned on the counter and wrote under what Ginny had written.

And health and success.

HP

PS Thanks for saving my life. Harry

Harry handed the book back to Neville. Pain exploded in his head and his palm hit his scar.

“Autographs, Harry?” said Voldemort.

The boys jumped back when they realized who it was and Neville sighed.

“Funny, Voldemort,” said Harry.

“So it’s true,” said Neville. “He’s haunting you.”

Voldemort sent him a glance. “Hello, Neville.”

Neville inclined his head in greeting and turned to Harry. “Can I interest you in some basatanium?” said Neville. “I’m told it repels ghosts.”

Harry choked. Voldemort chuckled.

“As I have said, Harry,” said Voldemort. “Your friends are both brave and loyal.”

“Voldemort, don’t you have something better to do?”

“Harry, I’m hurt,” said Voldemort but his tone was still amused. “Haven’t you missed me?”

“You wouldn’t like the response off the top of my head,” said Harry. “So give me a minute.”

Voldemort chuckled again, stretching a hand out towards Harry’s face. Harry leaned away.

“So where *have* you been?” said Harry.

“So you did miss me,” said Voldemort.

Harry rubbed his temples.

"Is he always like this?" said Neville to no one in particular.

Sean answered, "Lord Voldemort has made it his death's mission to annoy Professor Potter."

There was a group gasp and Harry turned to the adolescences who had been standing in wide-eyed, slack-jawed shock since Voldemort had materialized.

"Problem, MacBane?" said Sean.

"Y-you said his name," said the boy.

"Professor Potter is our teacher," said Sean. "We've seen what he's capable of." He looked at Voldemort. "We know what to call him."

Harry quickly looked at Voldemort. That was not a good tone.

Voldemort was staring hard at the student. "He's provoking me, Harry," said Voldemort.

But Sean was quick to defend. "I'm the only student from the class here. You can't touch him."

Oh, no. Harry tried willing Sean *not* to even try playing semantic games with Voldemort.

"But, Mr. McIves, they," Voldemort indicated the other youths from town, "Are not even students."

"I am," said Stan, looking confused.

Voldemort sent the seventh year a glance then turned a menacing glare back to Sean.

"Voldemort," said Harry with a sigh. "Please."

"All right, Harry," said Voldemort, but as he glanced back at Sean, he smiled.

Harry remembered that smile and what Snape had to say about it.

I've seen that smile before and I usually don't like what happens after it.

Voldemort vanished and Harry turned to Neville before anyone could say anything.

"So, been up to the school lately?" Harry completely changed the subject.

They spoke mostly about school, touching on Hermione and Neville's trips to deliver specialty plants to Professor Sprout. Invariably, the conversation came back around to Voldemort.

Sean was eager to stress the classes support against him. He brought up how they helped Harry contest a punishment.

"Professor Potter threw us a party in the common room to thank us," said Sean with pride.

Neville laughed softly. "I haven't been in the common room since graduation," said Neville. "The Fat Lady won't let anyone in without the password and I had trouble enough with *that* while we went there."

"I remember," said Harry with a smile.

"Wait a minute," said Neville, looking at Harry with suspicion. "You've been to the common room?"

"Of course," said Harry. "Being the heir and all. I can cheat."

Neville frowned. "You saw it, didn't you?" said Neville.

Harry fought his laugh. "I did," said Harry.

Neville bit his lip. "You don't look half as mad as I thought you'd be."

"I'm not," said Harry. "It was a bit weird, but I got the map back because of it."

"The-"Neville stopped and stared. "That was *the* map?"

“Yes,” said Harry. “Now I can keep track of Voldemort.”

“I’m glad.”

Harry frowned. “I didn’t appreciate seeing the pieces of my Nimbus in the case though.”

“That was Ron’s idea, Harry,” Neville explained. “He said you and he had such a history with that tree that it would be a shame not to include that incident in the memorial.”

Harry blinked, then had to laugh. “Well, that’s Ron.”

Neville nodded.

“Professor?”

Harry looked over at Sean.

“We’re going to head back,” said Sean. “It’s getting late.”

“Ok, Sean,” said Harry. “Thanks for the help.”

Sean shrugged. “Don’t forget practice on Tuesday.”

Harry grinned. “I won’t.”

Sean and Stan left.

“Practice?” said Neville.

“I’ve been practicing with the Gryffindor Quidditch team, giving them some pointers.”

“You’re flying with the team again?” said Neville, sounding thrilled.

“Just teaching at practices,” said Harry, with a shrug.

“Harry, that’s great,” said Neville. “I’ve got to come to see. What time?”

Because it was Neville, Harry didn't feel half as self-conscious. "7:00," said Harry. "Just keep it quiet, all right."

"Yeah, sure."

"Tea's on," called Mrs. Longbottom.

"Sorry, I have to get back to the castle, Mrs. L.," said Harry. He turned back to Neville and took his arm, locking their arms by the wrist. "I'll be back soon, Neville," said Harry. "We have a lot to catch up on."

"I know, Harry," said Neville with a grin. "See you soon."

Harry left the store hearing fragments of the boys comments behind him.

"Told you he was telling the truth."

"You didn't believe him either."

"And You Know Who was here."

"Wish I was going to Hogwarts."

Neville said nothing but Harry heard the sounds of broken glass being cleaned up.

The first day after the weekend, Harry's sixth years came in all muttering and chattering about their weekend. He let them talk for a few minutes as he got his notes out.

He had an interesting lesson planned and he was sure Voldemort would find it amusing. Harry wondered briefly where he was. He hadn't seen him since Hogsmeade.

Settling the class, Harry sat on his desk. "I'm going to be jumping around topic wise the next few weeks," said Harry. "Keep things interesting."

"Today," said Harry but he didn't get far.

Pain exploded in his head. His hand hit his scar, then he fell off the desk to the floor as Voldemort materialized and grasped him briefly with both hands.

Gasping, Harry demanded, "What the hell did you do that for?"

He started to get up but Voldemort grabbed his face again.

"We have an issue that needs clearing up," said Voldemort.

"We do?" rasped Harry.

Voldemort nodded gravely. "If you can not control your student, Harry," said Voldemort. "Then I will."

"What-"

Voldemort's fingers trailed down his cheek to keep him quiet.

"Mr. McIves deliberately provoked me, knowing I could do nothing to stop him."

Harry heard the class gasp and Sean groan.

He opened his mouth but Voldemort moved his knuckles up the right side of his face. Harry closed his eyes against the pain.

"The contract states," Voldemort continued, "That I can not touch you in front of any students but this class." He looked at the students. "Look at him, Mr. McIves – all of you. *This* is why he can counter the Cruciatus Curse. The pain he has endured, is capable of enduring is far greater than the curse can inflict. All the Unforgivables are no more than an annoyance to Harry now."

He looked back down at Harry, his eyes moving over his expression, knowing just how much pain Harry was in.

"He knows what to expect when he pushes me too far," said Voldemort. "His sarcasm and even disrespect amuse me, but he knows what I will do when he crosses the line. But he can take it and he does."

“Lord Voldemort,” croaked Sean.

“Pay attention, Mr. McIves,” said Voldemort harshly. “All of you. If any of you cross that line, Harry will suffer. Do you understand?”

The class murmured something. Harry wasn’t sure what. The room had blurred.

Voldemort let go and Harry hit the floor.

“I only give one warning,” said Voldemort.

Harry took a breath. “I contest,” he managed.

Voldemort looked down at him. “You can’t,” said Voldemort.

“I can,” said Harry as strongly as he could, which wasn’t much. “Think hard. Rowan.” It came out breathless but it came out.

Voldemort vanished as Rowan soared in. When he was pain free, he sent her back out and turned to the class. They appeared rather horrified at what just happened. Sean looked almost ill.

“Professor-“

Harry held up his hand for silence. “He can *not* control you,” said Harry. “We will straighten up this issue right now.”

Hand to his scar, Harry called him. *Voldemort*.

He materialized, frowning.

“We’re not done, Voldemort,” said Harry confidently as he sat down at his desk.

“She came.”

“She did,” said Harry. “I did nothing to provoke you. You had no ‘just provocation.’ You can’t control what the students say to you in this class or out of it.

“Our contract covers me and Ginger by extension,” Harry went on. “I can accept that. No one else is included in the ‘just provocation’ clause.”

Voldemort smirked at him. “But, Harry, the ‘just provocation’ clause is only included in touching your scar.”

Sean couldn’t argue semantics with Voldemort, but Harry could. Harry had learned from the master after all.

Harry smirked back and Voldemort’s eye brows shot up.

“But since you can only touch me in front of these students, the contract doesn’t specify as to why you touch me,” Harry pointed out. “You know I will accept punishment when I cross the line, which you so indiscriminately set,” Harry stood up, “but there is no reason in hell that I should accept it any other time.”

Voldemort stared hard into Harry’s eyes.

“I will not accept your ‘threat of torture manipulation’ over this class, Voldemort,” said Harry. “If you would like the contract to include that if anyone in this class provokes you then it is grounds for my punishment then I require a concession from you.”

Voldemort continued to stare, his expression unreadable. Harry walked around his desk and across the room to stop in front of Voldemort, in side the flinch zone.

“You have told me, more than once,” said Harry softly. “That it distresses you to see me in agony. What’s it to be, father?”

Voldemort reached a hand towards Harry face but stopped inches away. “I have taught you well, Harry,” said Voldemort, his red eyes never leaving Harry’s green. “I will concede your point.” Lowering his hand, he turned to the class, who were all on the edges of their seats. “But if anyone here provokes me with any such impertinence, they will regret it.”

Harry knew Voldemort could do little more than be nuisance, like Peeves, but that would quickly bore him.

Harry inclined his head. "Fair enough," said Harry, returning to the front of the class.

"Professor?"

"Yes, Missy?" said Harry.

Missy glanced at several of the other students. "You – er – you called him father."

Voldemort chuckled, settling into his chair, looking very pleased. "You did, Harry."

"I'm aware of what I said," said Harry casually, as he hopped on his desk.

"Will you tell them why?" Voldemort dared.

"We'll get the that, I'm sure," said Harry evasively.

"But–"

"Suffice to say for now," Harry cut Cindy off, "that in my 6th year, Voldemort left me the entire Slytherin estate. So in effect – he made me his heir."

"So you are the heir of Gryffindor *and* the heir of Slytherin?" said Rufus, his eyes wide.

"Yes," said Harry. "The document you saw me sign when we negotiated the contract was my acceptance of the inheritance."

The class rippled with the sounds of dawning. Harry knew he was making light of it but–

"But there is so much more to it than that, Harry," said Voldemort.

And it was too much to expect that Voldemort might not notice.

"I know, Voldemort," said Harry. "We will cover it later."

"Oh, Harry."

“Please, Voldemort,” said Harry. “I’m asking.”

Voldemort sighed. “All right, Harry.”

“Besides, you’re going to enjoy this.”

“Am I?” said Voldemort.

Harry turned to the class. “How many of you have done any formal dueling?”

Several students raised their hands. Missy poked Sean, who hadn’t.

“You’re in the dueling club,” she whispered.

But Sean was apparently still feeling guilty.

“Sean?” said Harry.

Sean stared at his hands on top of the desk. “He tortured you because of me.”

“Which he’s done many times,” said Harry.

“But it was my fault,” said Sean hollowly. “There was nothing I could do.”

“Sound familiar, Harry?”

Harry nodded. “Sean,” said Harry. Sean looked up. “There was a boy in my sixth year class who used to get physically ill at the thought of people suffering because of him.”

“Oh?” said Sean, interested.

“Yes. He couldn’t stand the feeling of helplessness either.”

“Really?” said Sean. “What happened to him?”

Voldemort chuckled.

“Honestly,” said Cindy with a frustrated gesture. “Men are so dense.”

Sean looked at her then back at Harry. "You?"

Harry nodded. "Threat of torture," said Harry. "He used every one of my family and friends to get me to do what he wanted."

Sean looked at him with a combination of awe and surprise. Harry ignored it.

"Never seemed to work," muttered Voldemort. "Had to resort to other methods."

Harry ignored that too and hopped off his desk.

"I have an interesting little demonstration if I could have two dueling volunteers."

Now likened to Harry, Sean stood up. Harry picked Philby to face him. They cleared out a dueling field, and the two boys pulled out their wands to face each other.

"Expelliarmus!"

The wands flew to Harry's hand.

"But, sir," said Sean. "How can we duel without wands?"

"How indeed," said Voldemort with a chuckle.

Harry ignored him again. "You will be using different wands," said Harry. He stepped up to Sean and pulled out his wand, placing it in Sean's hand. "You will use this one."

"Is this—"

"Yes, Sean," said Harry. "It's mine." He moved to Philby and pulled another wand out of his pocket. "You will use this one."

Philby gripped the wand and Voldemort stood up.

"Harry?"

"Yes, Voldemort. It's yours."

"They let you have my wand?" said Voldemort, drifting closer to the duelers.

"They didn't have a choice," said Harry lightly.

Voldemort laughed.

"This is Lord Voldemort's wand?" said Philby anxiously.

"Yes."

"Interesting demonstration, Harry," said Voldemort.

"I thought so," said Harry then to the duelers. "Now, you will both attempt to hit the other with a curse or hex at the same time."

"Do you think it will work, Harry?" said Voldemort.

"I believe so, since we are both here. Technically we are forcing them to duel."

"What--"

Harry cut Cindy off before she could get going. "Just go ahead, boys," said Harry.

And it worked. Pheonix song filled the room as the bead slid back and forth between the wands as the two boys struggled for supremacy. Harry felt Voldemort move up behind him.

"Harry, I don't think this will be pleasant if Mr. McIves wins," said Voldemort softly.

"They can handle it," Harry whispered back. "But," he added as the bead slid closer to Harry's wand, "I don't think that will be a problem."

The bead hit Harry's wand and with a spark the image of a castle floated between the duelers. Grand images of every ornate room flashed before them. The class watched in awe as the shadows of the last things Harry had done with his wand appeared before them.

Then Harry took hold of Sean's wrist and pulled up, breaking the connection.

"Wow," several students said at once.

"Harry, what were you doing?" said Voldemort.

"I was setting the wards," said Harry with a shrug. "I still need a wand for that."

"And what did you use it for before that?" said Voldemort curiously.

"Um, I don't really remember," said Harry honestly. In reality, Harry rarely used his wand anymore.

"Wormtail?" said Voldemort.

"No," said Harry.

"Who's Wormtail?" said Sean.

"What's a Wormtail?" said Cindy.

Voldemort chuckled. "Oh tell them, Harry."

Harry sighed. "Wormtail is Peter Pettigrew," said Harry.

"The animagus?" said Cindy. "The one who was friends with your father?"

Harry flinched. "Er-"

"Allow me, Harry," said Voldemort. "Wormtail betrayed Harry's parents and yet Harry saved his worthless life anyway. Then he took some of Harry's blood for me."

"They've heard that, Voldemort," said Harry. "Wormtail also kidnapped my friend Ron, Mr. Weasley, to offer him to Voldemort as a hostage."

"Which I didn't need because I already had Sirius."

"Then he betrayed me to the Ministry of Magic and almost landed me in jail. Then he nearly got Sirius killed."

"He sounds like a bloody-"

Missy cut Sean off, "Why didn't you go to jail, Professor?"

"I wasn't about to let them lock up my son," said Voldemort aghast.

Harry answered as if Voldemort hadn't spoken. "Voldemort caused an uproar (he has an unmatched flair for dramatics) in the courtroom," said Harry to Voldemort's amusement. "And at that point, I was powerful enough to break out of most magical bonds so I escaped."

Voldemort laughed at that. "Call it what it was, Harry. He ran. He tried to run from me."

"Semantics," muttered Harry.

"But by then there was no where Harry could go that I couldn't find him."

"Well, be that as it may," said Harry. "Wizarding code of honor is very specific. After everything Wormtail had done, I had every right to take back the life I had saved."

"So you did," said Cindy.

"I did," Harry admitted.

"Sounds like he deserved it," Dawn piped up.

"So what does this have to do with using a wand?" said Cindy.

"Well," Harry explained, "If I had used a wand to kill Pettigrew, the longer the wands were connected, the more the past uses for it would have been shown, just as you saw the shadows of the castle. It's called Prior Incantum which happens when brother wands are forced to duel."

"Brother wands?"

“Both of those wands contain a tail feather donated by the same phoenix,” Harry told them.

“Wow.”

“Cool,” said Missy.

“You killed without a wand?” said Cindy. “I didn’t think it could be done.”

Leave it to Miss Know-It-All, the second.

Voldemort chuckled. “I dare you, Harry.”

Harry glared at him and sighed.

“Let’s just say I can do any curse there is without a wand,” said Harry.

“Any curse,” said Cindy. “Why?”

“We will get to that.”

“Not ready are you, Harry?” said Voldemort seriously.

The class was looking between them with open interest.

“They are curious, Harry. You know how I admire that,” said Voldemort. “And the truth is so satisfying.”

Fortunately, Harry was saved by the bell. He took the wands back from the boys and return their own.

“So where is that castle, Professor?” said Missy.

“Bulgaria,” said Harry.

“Do you live there?” said Sean.

“It’s far too big for me and my wife,” said Harry. “But we go there every once in a while and,” he looked at Voldemort, “change things around.”

Voldemort laughed. "Very good, Harry. Is my room still there?" he asked curiously.

"Of course," said Harry.

"Why?" quizzed Voldemort.

Harry began digging out his notes for his next class. "Respect for the dead," he shot back without looking up.

Voldemort chuckled and Sean snorted.

Harry looked up then. He hadn't realized any of the students had remained. Cindy, Sean and Missy (what Harry considered the equivalent of Ron, Hermione and himself) were standing by his desk, listening.

"Why would Voldemort have a room at your house?" said Cindy.

"You three will be late," said Harry, sending them a glance. "I don't need another lecture from Professor Weasley."

"Avoiding the question?" said Voldemort suggestively.

"My second years are coming in, Voldemort," said Harry.

"Whoa, is that him?" said Jason Brent a young Slytherin, stopping inside the door.

Voldemort vanished and the Gryffindors left.

"Aw, Professor," said Jason. "Can't we meet him. All the upper classmen talk about him."

"He was here?" said Gabriel Vashton with awe. "You saw him?"

"Yes," said Jason.

Several others crowded around Harry's desk.

"Please, Professor Potter," said Sara Duvalle, tossing long blond hair over her shoulder. "We can take it."

“Yeah, let him come back.”

“We want to meet him,” Jason tried again. “He was in Slytherin too.”

Harry felt smothered. “Everyone sit,” said Harry.

The class took their seats, albeit reluctantly, muttering complaints. They looked up at Harry with disappointment.

“Is this a class decision?” said Harry. “It has to be unanimous. If even one person doesn’t-“

“Oh, it is,” said Jason. “We all want to meet him. Honest.”

Since the entire class was nodding enthusiastically, Harry sighed and relented.

Voldemort.

“This is most unusual, Harry,” Harry heard Voldemort’s voice. He hadn’t materialized.

“The students want to meet you,” said Harry, looking toward the voice.

“Do they?” said Voldemort.

“Yes.”

“Are you expressly asking me to this class?” said Voldemort.

“Will you behave?” said Harry.

“Will you beg me?”

“Voldemort,” said Harry with exasperation.

Voldemort chuckled. “Just ask, Harry.”

“Join us, Voldemort,” said Harry. “Please.”

Voldemort materialized and the class all started talking at once.

Harry quieted them and introduced him as, "Lord Voldemort, Tom Marvolo Riddle, the former heir of your house."

"These are Slytherins?" said Voldemort.

"Yes."

"Former heir?" said Sara.

"Well I *am* dead, aren't I," said Voldemort.

The class laughed.

"I heard the Slytherin estate is the biggest out of the four," said Gabriel.

"Me too."

"Salazar was the richest and the most powerful," said Jason with confidence. "Wasn't he, Lord Voldemort?"

Harry looked at Voldemort and raised his brows expectantly.

Voldemort sighed. "Salazar was indeed very powerful but so was Godric Gryffindor," said Voldemort. "As for the estate..."

"Slytherin is larger," said Harry simply.

Everyone looked back at him.

"Is it?" said Voldemort.

"Not by much," said Harry. "But, yes, it is."

"Fascinating," said Voldemort.

"But how do *you* know, Professor?" said Jason.

"Here we go again," muttered Harry.

"Oh, tell them, Harry," said Voldemort. "They'll find out anyway."

Harry sighed. "Because Tom M. Riddle," he gestured at Voldemort, "Lord Voldemort, left the Slytherin estate to me."

"Isn't that odd though?" said Gabriel "Weren't you in Gryffindor?"

"I am also the heir of Gryffindor," said Harry. "Which is why I know how big both estates are."

"Wow," said Jason. "You must be loaded."

The class laughed. So did Harry – he had to.

"But why would you leave your inheritance to him?" Gabriel addressed Voldemort. "I mean you tried to kill him so often..."

Harry opened his mouth but Voldemort stopped him.

"Before you jump all over that one, Harry," said Voldemort and he turned to the class. "As you mentioned, Professor Potter was always a worthy adversary. He succeeded in thwarting my plans time and time again. Since I didn't have a physical heir, who could be more worthy of the Slytherin fortune than him?"

"Choices," said Harry.

"Prophecy," said Voldemort. "The most powerful wizard in the world, Harry Potter, has inherited both prestigious titles. His children will continue the line of greatness for both houses."

Voldemort settled into his chair, his smile smug.

"The new heirs will be great. Mark my words."

Chapter 7

The Lion's Woes and the Dragon's Tale

True to his word, Neville came to the Gryffindor Quidditch practice on Tuesday night. Harry spotted him from the air as he was circling the pitch. Neville moved up the stands towards Hermione and Harry flew over.

"Hello, Hermione," said Neville.

Hermione looked up, dropped her book and jumped to her feet. "Oh Neville," she cried as she threw her arms around him. "How are you? Harry said he'd gone to see you. I wish I could've gone too."

Neville just smiled at her.

Harry hovered over to them and noticed a tall, hooded figure take a seat in the stands a couple of rows behind them.

"Hi, Neville," said Harry.

Neville sat down with a cheerful greeting.

Harry bent his knee and put his foot on the broomstick in front of him, resting his arms on his knee. He hovered in perfect balance as he spoke with Neville.

Sean pulled to a stop next to him, looking amazed at Harry's position on the broom.

"I wish I had balance like that," said Sean.

Harry sighed and dropped his leg over the side. "Is Stan ready?"

"Yes, sir," said Sean. "When ever you are."

"Ok," said Harry. "I'm coming." Sean zoomed away. "Sean is a very good Seeker," Harry told Neville. "He can spot the snitch quickly, but he has a broom control problem. He tries to out do himself."

“You’re a tough act to follow, Harry,” said Neville seriously. “You wanted to prove yourself too.”

Harry smirked.

“Give him time,” said Hermione.

Harry nodded and took off. He stayed with Sean as they circled the stadium. Harry spotted the snitch and had to fight his instinct to dart after it. A moment later, Sean saw it and turned sharply left and followed.

“Watch the bludger,” called Harry.

Sean ducked it and managed to stay with the snitch. When the snitch dove, so did the boy.

Great! Harry dove after them. They were speeding toward the ground.

“Keep your center,” Harry shouted.

Sean reached out toward the golden ball but Harry knew he’d never get it before they hit the ground.

“Pull up, Sean!” shouted Harry.

But he didn’t. To Harry’s horror, Sean jumped up onto his broomstick.

It’s too soon. He’s not ready.

Sean pulled up on the handle. The broom leveled then angled up, brushing the back on the ground. Sean tumbled backward off the broom.

“SEAN!” yelled Harry.

Jumping onto his own stick, Harry pulled out of the dive and let go. Once he was beside Sean, he pressed his back foot down and the broom stopped. Harry jumped off and dropped to his knees beside the boy.

“Sean, can you hear me?” said Harry, looking him over. He didn’t see any blood.

“I’m all right, Professor,” said Sean, sounding irritated. “I pulled up too far, but at least I pulled up.”

Harry helped him to his feet. “True enough, but you scared the hell out of me.”

“No doubt you made a spectacular landing, racing to my aid.”

It sounded like a grumble. Harry sighed.

“I have no idea,” said Harry. “I was too worried about you. Next time do as you’re told.”

The rest of the practice was uneventful and Harry bid goodbye to the team. Neville and Hermione had left earlier as the practice had gone on later than usual.

He strolled back to the castle, enjoying the crisp fall air.

“Keep walking,” a hoarse muffled voice commanded as a wand point was jabbed in his back.

A glance over his shoulder showed the hooded man from stands looming behind him. Harry continued toward the castle.

“Did you know that I can apparate on Hogwarts grounds?” said Harry lightly.

“I know.”

“And that I could disarm you in an instant,” Harry added.

“I know.”

Puzzled, Harry asked, “What do you want?”

“Talk.”

The voice was totally alien to him, but that was easy enough to do with magic. He entered the castle and started up the stairs, moving toward his rooms.

"Do I know you?"

"Yes," said the man.

Curious. "Do I like you?" said Harry.

"Sometimes."

Now, Harry was more than curious. He led the stranger to his classroom. They both entered and the man closed the door behind them, still holding his wand on Harry.

"Who's that?" said Voldemort from his chair.

"I don't know," said Harry.

"You don't?" said Voldemort. "Why is he holding a wand on you? Is he an idiot?"

Harry laughed softly.

"Make him leave," said the man in a whisper near Harry's ear.

"He wants you to leave," said Harry.

"Does he?" said Voldemort. "I think not. Unless you want to be alone with him?"

"I'm curious," said Harry.

"And what will you give me?"

"Voldemort, the contract doesn't say I have to let you plague me every minute of the day."

"Harry, my son. I'm hurt."

Harry nearly growled, pulling out his hair. "Please, Voldemort," said Harry with frustration. "I'm asking."

Voldemort chuckled. "All right, Harry."

Voldemort vanished, and Harry moved across the classroom rubbing his face.

He never lets up with you, does he?

Harry spun around to face the cloaked man with disbelief. He hadn't heard that voice in his head in years.

"Draco?" said Harry softly, daring to hope.

Pale hands reached up, one still gripping the wand and pushed back the hood.

"Hi, Harry."

Harry could only stare at him, studying the familiar features of the boy who had been his arch rival only to become one of the only people he could talk to about Voldemort and the effect he had had on Harry's emotions. Draco had aged well, filling out to resemble his father alarmingly.

Now with Voldemort tormenting him again, there wasn't another person alive Harry was more grateful to see. Draco stared back at him, surveying Harry with his own inscrutable inspection as if just waiting to see Harry's reaction.

With all the pent up emotions and volatile thoughts caused by Voldemort, Harry didn't know whether to grab him in a hug or yell the bloody roof down on him. He decided to do both.

"Where the bloody hell have you been?" demanded Harry, crushing him once before he moved away to pace. "Do you have any idea of the crap I've been through the past couple of weeks? What happened to 'I'll be there?' Was it too much to-"

Are you through?

Harry looked back at Draco, who stood in the same spot, arms crossed, brows raised.

Harry opened his mouth then closed it again.

"I missed you too, Harry," said Draco with a smirk.

Harry ran both hands through his hair. "Sorry," he muttered as he fell into his chair at his desk.

Draco stepped further into the room.

"You should have called me."

Harry met his gaze. "I didn't know I could," said Harry. "How did you? Why didn't you call me?"

Draco sighed and took off his over cloak, throwing it over one of the student's desk as he moved to Harry's desk. "I didn't know the 'gift' was working again until last week," said Draco. He pushed up the sleeve of his robe, exposing his left forearm. Rubbing the Dark Mark lightly, he met Harry's gaze. "The Mark started getting darker around the end of July," said Draco. "I didn't know what to think of it. It was beyond reason and logic to consider Voldemort might be back. When I didn't hear anything from you, I assumed it was some sort of fluke."

"I hadn't heard from *you* in years, Draco," said Harry. "It was like you dropped off the face of the earth."

"I had to put my life into some kind of order," said Draco. "You and Dumbledore cleared me but there was a lot more to resuming my life – a life – then simply picking up where I left off."

"I know," said Harry. "It must have been hard. You could have asked for help. I would have–"

"I know you would have," said Draco. "But you had your own problems."

"They seem sort of lame now," said Harry cynically. He magicked a chair beside his desk which Draco sat down in, then he summoned two glasses and a bottle.

"But I came as soon as started hearing some bizarre random thoughts."

"Oh?" said Harry, looking up. He handed Draco a glass he had just filled. "What did you hear?"

"Oh you know," said Draco. "The standard pathetic Gryffindor comments. And since I know I don't think like a moron, I knew it had to be you."

Harry smirked at him. "Typical Slytherin attitude, that," said Harry. "But why didn't you call?"

"Use your brain, Potter," said Draco. "I knew Voldemort had to be involved. I didn't know what kind of position you were in. I wasn't going to jeopardize your situation until I knew what was going on. *You* should have contacted me right away."

"I told you," said Harry. "I didn't know I could."

"Oh?" said Draco. "Forgotten how to use an owl, have we? I know damned well your owl could've found me, even where I was. And they expect you to be a teacher?" Draco eyed Harry's clothes. "Even if you do dress the part."

"Hey, I was playing Quidditch," said Harry defensively. "What do you expect me to wear on the pitch?"

Draco waved it off with a smile. "So, it's true. The most powerful wizard in the world is teaching."

Harry shrugged. "That's what I've decided to do. I'm pretty good too, I'm told."

"Of course," Draco said with a snort. "Harry Potter excels in everything."

Harry snorted then. "I know one Potions Master who would take very loud exception to that remark."

"I know that one," said Draco, helping himself to the bottle and refilling his glass. "Speaking of Snape, I'm surprised I didn't hear from him about the Mark."

Harry frowned. "Severus didn't mention it to me either. Maybe he figured it was a fluke too."

"Maybe, but he's here," Draco reasoned. "When he discovered it was a ghost..."

"Well yes," said Harry. "But in the beginning, Voldemort didn't let anyone see or hear him but me. No one believed me. Everyone thought I had finally snapped, which of course amused Voldemort to no end."

"Sounds like him."

"I expect I *will* end up crazy one of these days," said Harry. "So where *have* you been?"

"Well, I went as far as you can go education wise," said Draco. "I have several offers, mostly big business but right after school, I did some field research. I've a degree in archeology, but I'm more like an archaist."

Harry blinked at this. "Really?"

"Yes, you know, ancient artifacts and-"

"I know what it means," said Harry with irritation.

Draco grinned maddeningly. "Anyway, this writer for the Quibbler reported that a team of scientists had unearthed some magical relics at an Aztec dig," said Draco. "So the paper hired me to confirm if any of it really was magical."

"So you went."

“Damn right I did,” said Draco. “Of course some Ministry people were there as well – can’t have magical artifacts falling into Muggle hands can we?”

“Find anything?”

“Oh, the site was genuine – a real historical ruin – beautiful artwork, a lot of phoenix imagery (they were rather obsessed), but nothing magical – from our world,” said Draco and he added a laugh. “The ministry chit was disappointed though.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, it seems that they’ve been looking for some amulet for centuries and they thought they had a lead.” He paused for a drink.

“Sounds exciting,” said Harry, not being able to keep from feeling jealous.

Draco shrugged. “Anyway, I did such a thorough job that this investigation firm hired me to check out a site in the Amazon jungle. That was interesting as well, but the climate was a bit – er – moist.”

Harry had to laugh then.

“What?” said Draco.

“I’m having trouble picturing Draco Malfoy, ‘Mr. Fashion Sense,’ digging in the dirt and wading through the sweltering jungle.”

“I’ll have you know,” said Draco indignantly. “I am *not* afraid to get dirty. I just prefer not to. Besides, it isn’t as if I had to do any of the actual retrieving of the pieces. I merely had to inspect them.”

“So basically, you’ve been a freelance treasure hunter.”

Draco gagged, horrified. “Harry, how undignified!” He ruined it with the Malfoy smirk. “The term is artifact authenticator. Pure research, highly professional.”

"Yeah, right," said Harry with a laugh. "The wizarding world's version of Indiana Jones."

Draco blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

Harry had to grin at his confusion. "Never mind," said Harry. "It suits you though and it explains why you haven't been the epitome of correspondence."

"Yes, well." Draco had the grace to look embarrassed. "What little time I had to write, I usually reserved for my mother. And judging by what I'd read about you, you were too busy—"

"Too busy?" said Harry incredulously. "I would've given anything to have heard from you." Harry almost bit his tongue at the smug look Draco sent him. *Arrogant bastard.*

Draco chuckled.

"So now, what will you do?" said Harry.

"Well, I still have some of those offers," said Draco. "And I have a long standing invitation to sit on the Board of Governors for the School."

"Oh?"

"That I may take now," said Draco.

"Wouldn't be the Board of Governors without a Malfoy on it," said Harry. Draco frowned but nodded. "Are they still harassing you about your father?"

"Not as much anymore," said Draco. "And they lifted the restriction on our vault."

"Well that's good," said Harry. "I take it, you haven't heard from him." Draco shook his head. "Well don't fault him for that. He's protecting you."

"I know," said Draco, his voice taking on a bitter edge. "I just miss him."

"I'm sure he misses you too," said Harry refilling their glasses. *I know he does.*

"This is good stuff," said Draco, then his gaze snapped up. "What was that?"

"What was what?" said Harry.

"I heard that, Harry," said Draco jumping to his feet. "You know where he is, don't you?"

"Shhh," Harry nearly shouted. *And you call me a moron.*

"You are a moron." *Where is he?*

Draco, if you were me, and you wanted to disappear, what would you do?

Harry felt Draco's thoughts tumble around in his head until...

I'd change my name and move to Bulgaria.

Harry nodded.

You sent my father to Bulgaria? Draco's thought was incredulous.

I have a rather nice estate there.

Draco fell into his chair laughing. He looked up abruptly. *Don't tell me he's using the name Jack Taylor?*

No. I am Jack Taylor. He is just the caretaker of the property.

"I don't believe it," said Draco, shaking his head.

"No one goes there except me and Ging," said Harry. "Of course now that I know that you are still among the living, you'll be invited to visit us there."

Draco started laughing again, obviously relieved and delighted. When he recovered, he ventured, "So how is Ginny? How is she coping with Voldemort?"

"Angrily, most of the time," said Harry. "When she complains, I tell her to go shopping – with his money."

That set Draco off laughing again. "Now *that's* funny," said Draco. "So you still got the Slytherin fortune?" Harry nodded. "Now the richest wizard in the world too and still you've chosen to teach. Pathetic."

"I know," said Harry. "But the kids are great, and I get to play Quidditch again."

"Should have gone pro."

"I've had enough spotlight, Draco. You know that."

"True, but at least you'd have more time with your family," said Draco. "Must be difficult with you here."

"Don't forget, I can apparate back and forth," said Harry. "It isn't a hardship. I see her every couple of weeks."

"Lucky."

"What about you? Found anyone yet?"

Draco shook his head. "No I'm still a free agent and enjoying it thank you very much." He drained his glass. "So, it'd be cool with you if I accepted a position on the board?"

Harry blinked with surprise. "Why are you asking me?"

"Well our past is a little shaky," said Draco. "You know it. The Ministry doesn't want to upset you."

"Upset me?" said Harry and he laughed – had to. "Draco, the Minister of Magic knows that the only thing that upsets me is his only daughter being mad at me. Everything else I can take."

Draco grinned. "And you have."

"Take it, Draco. You'll be good there. I know it."

"Thanks," said Draco with a grin. He grabbed the bottle again and topped off their glasses.

Harry picked up his glass and stared into, suddenly nervous. Draco just got there, he couldn't leave yet.

"What?" said Draco with that knowing smirk.

"You, er, wouldn't have to start right away, would you?" said Harry.

"Why?" said Draco.

Harry returned his gaze to the liquid in his glass and shrugged. "No reason."

Draco snorted. "Damned pathetic Gryffindor moron." Harry looked up. "Are you going to pretend after that little explosion before that you don't want me here?"

Harry shook his head. "Damned arrogant Slytherin bastard."

"Exactly," said Draco. "I know you hate it, but you need me right now. And it just so happens that a position on the Board of Governors does not require a large amount of time."

Draco paused to swirl the scotch around in his glass. Then he took a sip.

"So," prompted Harry. *Bastard, tell me.*

Draco chuckled. "So, now here I am, back in the country, with all this spare time on my hands," Draco met Harry's gaze, "and permission from the headmaster of this very school to assist a one Professor Jacob Billings in instructing the fine art of fencing."

Harry's jaw dropped open and he stood up.

"Provided, of course, that I help inspire some new enrollment."

Speechless, Harry continued to stare, but he felt a sort of lightening in his chest as Draco continued.

"This, of course, would require me to convince one stubborn, modest, Gryffindor Natural to put on a show," said Draco, contemplating his glass as if Harry wasn't standing over him, gawking. "I, knowing said Natural personally, am confident that I can get him to pick up his sword."

Draco put down his glass then and stood up as well. "This, however, is impossible," said Draco as he looked over at Harry. "Because, this particular fencer never retrieved the sword which he left in my care." He pulled open his robe, revealing a four foot sheath with an elaborate silver hilt strapped around his hips.

Harry's eyes moved over the sword, stopping at the intricate web of around the hilt.

"You must be pretty rusty, by now, Harry," said Draco.

Harry ignored the comment. "Is he all right?" said Harry softly.

Draco frowned and shook his head. "I don't know," said Draco. "He went dormant after they found you in the Chamber of Secrets."

Harry looked up. "He did?" said Harry. "How do you know?"

"Well for starters Sennie hasn't come out of the sword since I've had it," said Draco as he unstrapped the sword belt. He grasped the hilt and looked up at Harry with raised brows.

If Sennie, the snake entrapped within the hilt of Harry's sword, was awake, then the hilt would have tightened around the hand of anyone holding it, unless it was Harry, until the bearer let go.

Draco held the sword out. Harry took a hold of the sheath with his left hand, just under the hilt and looked down at the cage around the grip. He glanced at Draco and bit his lip.

"Go on, Harry," said Draco.

Harry sighed and lifted his right hand to the hilt.

No sooner did Harry's hand close around the grip when the web erupted with an almost blinding coruscation of white light. A thin, three and a half foot snake emerged like a shot and coiled quickly up Harry's arm, around his neck, down the other arm and back.

"Master, master. Oh it IS you. Oh, master, where have you been?"

Sennie finally stopped, wrapped around Harry's upper right arm, his head held up so he could look at Harry's face. His tongue forked out repeatedly.

Draco was laughing at the snake's enthusiasm but Harry ignored him.

"Hello, Sennie. I missed you too."

Harry looked at Draco and smiled, a true smile. "Thanks, Draco."

Draco shrugged as he returned to his seat and his drink. "It isn't like he was any problem," said Draco.

"I guess not," said Harry cheerfully as he sat back down as well. Sennie coiled up and down his arm until he found a comfortable spot around his upper arm with his head on Harry's shoulder.

"So, *now*, what do you say?" said Draco.

"About what?"

"You'll help me establish room and board here at Hogwarts?"

Draco's innocent question didn't fly with Harry because his eyes were so full of humor he was nearly tearing.

Even the thought of 'putting on a show' for the school couldn't detract from Harry's relief that Draco was staying for a while. "You know I will," said Harry.

"Say it, Harry."

Harry looked down at his snake and stroked him gently. "I want you to stay."

"What was that?" said Draco.

Harry looked up, glaring. "Bastard," said Harry. "You know I need you to stay."

Draco chuckled. "Sorry. You know what a kick I get out of it."

"Yeah, I know," grumbled Harry. "Slytherin tactics."

Draco refilled their glasses again. He eyed the bottle. "Summon another bottle of this stuff and I think I'll be ready to renew my acquaintance with the master," said Draco. "How do you get him to come back?"

Harry summoned another bottle from his private office. "I just call him," said Harry.

"You can still call him?" said Draco.

"Er, yeah," said Harry.

Draco studied his expression. Harry looked away.

"Hmm. I don't like the look of this," said Draco. He sat up abruptly. "Wait a minute – the contract? You mentioned a contract."

Harry sighed. "Listen, Draco. There's a lot going on."

"Obviously," said Draco. "Just spit it out."

"First of all," said Harry. "You were right."

"About what?"

"About everything," said Harry. "You nailed it. The magical bond, that I got to him, as well, that he cared – and that it would be his downfall."

"I have a feeling I'm not going to like this."

Harry shook his head. "In the Chamber of Secrets, Voldemort conceded."

"Oh, boy," said Draco, rubbing his face with his hands.

Obviously Draco knew what that meant. Why the hell didn't anyone ever tell him these little things?

"He wanted you to live," muttered Draco.

Harry nodded. "And me, being the pathetic Gryffindor moron—"

"Didn't know he could do that."

"Right," said Harry.

"And you were convinced you had to die." Draco shook his head. "Yeah, I get it." He looked up sharply. "So what are the ramifications? Aside from him being your personal ghost."

Harry stared into his glass. "We're still connected."

"Yeah, I get that," said Draco. "You can call him and he probably always knows where you are. So—"

"Draco," said Harry, meeting the gray gaze. "He can touch me."

Draco snorted. "Don't be ridiculous. Ghosts can't—"

"Draco, he can touch me."

Draco stood up. "No. You're kidding. Tell me you're kidding."

"He's touched my scar twice since school started."

Draco just stared. Harry wished he could find some satisfaction in actually rendering the Slytherin speechless but couldn't. And the silence didn't last.

Draco exploded. A sight to see. For all his fine education, he could still swear like a chimney sweep. Harry was impressed when he switched languages several times. But since Harry wasn't exactly

sure who was being condemned through the tirade, he remained quiet.

Finally, Draco took a breath and speared Harry with a calculating look.

“So how do you control him?” said Draco.

“When Hermione discovered he couldn’t be in the same room as a phoenix, I started keeping Rowan with me all the time,” said Harry. “But that only pissed him off. He threatened to go to my house and annoy Ginger unless we could come to an agreement.”

“Hence the contract,” said Draco.

Harry nodded. “Since we can still shake on it, it’s legal.”

Draco fell back into his chair and downed the remainder of his glass. “So how is it?” said Draco. “I mean the relationship?”

“At first it was strained,” said Harry. “A lot like during our 5th year when he was first trying to manipulate me and prove his control over me.”

“And now?”

“Now we seem to be slipping more into how it was 7th year.”

“You asked, and he left,” said Draco.

Harry nodded.

“What about the students?”

“They cope,” said Harry. “He can’t hurt anyone but me, and he can only come to my younger classes if I ask him to. He considers himself a teaching aid.”

“Oh?”

“He doesn’t let me omit little facts that might embarrass me, and most of my students know he rarely lies.”

“So he throws your modesty out the window,” said Draco, not quite repressing his grin.

“Basically,” said Harry. “You know how he likes to gloat.”

Draco nodded. “So, what else should I know?”

“He can’t touch me in front of any students, except the ones who were present when we negotiated the contract.”

“Gryffindors, I expect,” said Draco, his smirk back in place.

Harry nodded. “And he can’t touch my scar without ‘just provocation,’ but I can contest if I can prove it isn’t ‘just’ and call Rowan.”

Draco shook his head. “This is ugly.”

“Yeah, well, my life is a nightmare,” muttered Harry. “Some things never change.”

Draco refilled both their glasses. “Ok. Call him.”

Harry took a quick gulp of his drink and paced away from the desk.

Voldemort.

Pain exploded in his head, and Harry hit his knees. Voldemort had materialized behind Harry, inside the flinch zone.

“Oh dear,” said Voldemort. “Harry, did I sneak up on you?”

Harry turned, sitting on the floor. “Funny, Voldemort.” He gestured at Draco who had stood up by Harry’s desk across the room.

“Hello, my lord,” said Draco.

Voldemort turned slowly. “Ah, Draco, my boy.” He turned back and looked down at Harry with a smile. “I see the reinforcements have arrived.”

Chapter 8

Normalcy and the Nightmare

Harry thoroughly enjoyed the rest of the week. Although Draco had left the castle (he had to check in at the Ministry and accept his position on the Board of Governors, and see his mother), having the 'gift' back made life more interesting – more normal. That thought had sort of distressed him. Since when was it considered 'normal' to hear someone else's voice in your head?

Normal for you you mean. Had been Draco's thought.

How do you figure that?

Oh, you know, Harry. Talking to snakes, making contracts with ghosts, countering Unforgivables, dueling without a wand – normal.

Harry had laughed – had to.

He had gone home for the weekend. Ginger had been pleased that Draco had returned and almost thrilled that Harry would be able to fence regularly again. Then she had dragged him shopping.

"Harry, if you're going to put on a fencing exhibition for the school again, you need a new outfit," Ginger had told him.

Harry had grumbled but relented. Strolling through Diagon Alley with his wife on his arm on a beautiful Sunday afternoon mellowed him considerably and when they met up with Ron and Hermione for dinner, not even Voldemort's presence could diminish his contentment.

Voldemort had lingered, seen and heard only by Harry, through the meal merely listening and observing. Curiosity piqued, Harry lifted his gaze to where he hovered behind Ron across the table.

"Why so quiet?" said Harry.

As Harry's company looked around briefly, Voldemort raised his brows.

“Did you want me to join in this quaint conversation?” said Voldemort.

Since the topic of conversation happened to be a problem in Ron’s department at the Ministry, Harry shrugged.

“I’m just surprised,” said Harry.

“I did not wish to intrude on your serenity,” said Voldemort. “You have looked pleased all day.”

“And that pleases you?” said Harry.

Voldemort smiled. “You know it does, my son.”

“He’s here, isn’t he?” said Ron.

Ginger rolled her eyes. Hermione clucked her tongue.

“Honestly, Ron,” said Hermione.

“Have you been following me all day?” said Harry.

“Mostly,” said Voldemort. “I wanted to tell you what a stir Draco caused at the castle.”

Harry snorted. “Bet he loved that.”

Voldemort chuckled. “You know he did,” he said.

Voldemort left them soon after and the remainder of the night passed pleasantly. When Harry finally dropped into his bed back at Hogwarts, he was feeling disturbingly peaceful.

Harry?

He knew it couldn’t last.

Hmm? Problem?

Not really. Just wondered if you heard about the new decree from the Ministry.

Harry sighed. It hadn't taken long at all for Draco to become knee deep in Ministry politics. *Not likely.* He couldn't help the smirk. *You know they never tell me anything.*

Draco laughed. *You'll probably hear about it tomorrow then.*

Will I like it?

I doubt it.

Harry snorted then. *Are you going to tell me?*

Will you beg me?

Funny. Harry rolled over, tiredness settling over him. *Night, Draco.*

Harry.

I'm tired, Draco.

OK, but don't say I didn't warn you.

Yeah, yeah.

Sleep over-took him and Draco's thoughts were shut out.

Harry strode into his classroom, allowing the quiet chattering of his students to continue as he perused the book in his hand. He had over-slept and gone to the library in lieu of breakfast. Having Sennie back reminded Harry of the Vengeance Curse (another curse which he had accidentally survived) and he was going to assign a number of Dark Curses to his classes to see what the students could come up with to defend against them or counter them.

Harry felt some amount of guilt for leaving Sennie in the sword hilt on the wall of the fencing classroom, but Sennie hadn't really complained and Harry's reasons were sound. First, Draco had wanted to 'show off' the sword (it was from his father's collection) and demonstrate an actual Entrapped Sword to the students. Second, he didn't want Nagini wandering back into Harry's room (where she had

made her nest) and finding Sennie and figuring Master Harry had left her a snack.

Laying the book on his desk, he turned to the class. The murmurs died down as the class looked back, but it didn't stop completely. Whispering continued toward the back of the room where Sean, Missy and Cindy sat. Unusual in itself as the three usually sat in the front.

Harry sent a glance to Voldemort's chair. He couldn't see Voldemort, but Harry knew he was there.

"Mr. McIves," said Harry finally and the boy looked up then around as if just realizing he was in class. "Did I miss a Quidditch match or something?"

"Er, what, Professor?" said Sean.

"Well, obviously something of interest has occurred to incite such zealous conversation."

"Sorry, sir," said Sean, dropping his gaze.

Harry sent him an understanding grin and picked up the book, opening it to a marked page. Before he could take a breath, the whispering started again. With a sigh, Harry put down the book again and looked at the three now guilty looking students.

"Save it or share it, Miss Larsen," said Harry.

"Sorry, Professor," said Cindy. "It's just that Sean was telling us about his class yesterday."

"Oh?" said Harry, sitting on his desk. "Yesterday was Sunday," he reminded them.

"Yes, sir," said Sean. "I take an elective and, well, it was the best class we've had so far."

"Ah," said Harry with interest. "Do tell."

Sean perked up. "I don't know how much you know about the art of fencing, but we have a new temporary assistant teacher."

Harry blinked in surprise then surprised himself by not laughing. Apparently, no one had mentioned Harry's fencing skills. Harry could bet it was all Draco's idea, but Harry couldn't help but feel slighted that Professor Billings hadn't mentioned him at one time or another to his fencing classes.

Voldemort was quiet also so Harry let it go by.

"Ah, yes. Professor Billings' class," said Harry. "You must be talking about Malfoy."

The students became almost animated then and Harry could only shake his head. He silently called Draco but got no answer.

"You know him, sir?" said Cindy.

Harry snorted. "Know him?" Harry looked at them with surprise. "I'm disappointed in you three. Especially you Miss Larsen."

Cindy looked taken aback.

"I thought everyone in Hogwarts, especially Gryffindors, knew of the Potter/Malfoy enmity," said Harry.

Cindy blinked then gasped. "He's *that* Malfoy?"

Harry nodded. "Draco Malfoy is the most arrogant Slytherin bastard there is."

"Harry, what's going on?" said Voldemort.

The classes total lack of acknowledgment told Harry that Voldemort was speaking only to him.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out," said Harry, looking toward his chair.

The kids noted the comment but it didn't distract them from their focus.

“Maybe he is, sir,” said Sean. “But if you’ve ever seen him fence.”

“I have,” said Harry.

“Then you’ll know,” Sean went on. “He totally out-classed Professor Billings.”

“I’m not disputing Malfoy’s skill with a sword,” said Harry. “He *is* brilliant – although I’ve seen better-“

“Professor Billings said he’s fenced with some of the best swordsmen in the world,” Sean went on again.

Harry nodded. “Yes, that’s true.”

“And that he was tested by an Acknowledged Master.”

“I can attest to that.”

“Really?” said Missy.

“Yes, it was our seventh year,” said Harry. He stole a glance at Voldemort but Voldemort was watching the class with mild amusement.

“Mr. Malfoy said that the other fencer who was tested by the Acknowledged Master at the time, actually *beat* him,” Sean added with awe.

Harry managed to contain his laugh. What the hell was Draco up to?
“He did,” said Harry.

“You saw it?” said Sean jealously.

“I was there,” said Harry evasively.

Sean’s excitement was obvious. “And now, Mr. Malfoy said that this other fencer was going to come back and fence with him, in a demonstration for the school to generate enrollment.”

“Yeah, I heard that too,” said Harry.

Sean frowned then. "You don't seemed pleased," said Sean. "Wouldn't you like to see-"

"I'm sure it will be a wonderful show," said Harry with a grin. "Malfoy always puts on a good show."

"He says this guy is a Natural."

"Oh? He told you that, did he?" said Harry.

"Do you know what a Natural is?" said Sean.

Voldemort laughed out loud but Harry ignored him.

"I do."

"He says that he can get him to test me," said Sean now proud.

"Test you?" said Harry curiously.

Sean couldn't contain his enthusiasm. "Professor Billings suspects that I could be a Natural but he can't tell for sure. Mr. Malfoy fenced with me too, to see, and he said it was likely, but a sure fire way to tell would be for another Natural to test me." Sean said all this in one breath.

"And Malfoy thinks he can get this guy to test you," said Harry still wondering what Draco was up to.

"Yes," said Sean. "He says he knows him well even if he is..."

"Even if he is what?" prompted Harry.

Sean looked suddenly embarrassed. "Well, Mr. Malfoy said he's sort of pathetic."

Voldemort burst out laughing and this time the class looked toward his chair.

Great.

"Oh, he did, did he?" said Harry.

“Er, yes,” said Sean.

“Do you know him?” said Cindy.

Harry sighed. “Yeah, I know him, and Malfoy’s right,” said Harry. “He is pathetic.”

Voldemort chuckled. “He is also quite magnificent,” said Voldemort.

There was another stir of excitement among the students. Harry picked up his book again, waiting for them to settle.

Until he heard, “I can’t wait until tonight.”

Harry’s gaze shot up to Alex Richards.

“Tonight?” said Harry.

“Yeah, after the feast,” said Alex, looking around nervously.

“Tonight?” echoed Harry as if he hadn’t just heard.

TONIGHT???!!!

Good God, Harry. You don’t have to shout.

Tonight?

Yeah. Have to do it before everyone finds out it’s you. Shock factor you know.

Is that what you’re doing?

Oh, don’t be so pathetic. Gloating rights, remember. Enjoy it while you can.

Harry’s frustration was palpable. *Draco, so help me-*

Oh get a grip. It’ll be fun. Flying and fencing and all that. Think how shocked and thrilled your little Gryffindors will be.

Harry sighed and heard Draco laugh.

See you tonight, Harry. And-

I know, I know. Dress for it.

He shut out Draco's laughter and turned back to his class.

"All right," said Harry as he picked up the book again. "Who can tell me about inert spells?"

Cindy's hand shot up. After glancing over the rest of the class, Harry sighed. Never did any good to ignore Hermione either.

"Go ahead, Cindy."

"Inert spells are any spells, hexes or curses cast on inanimate objects," said Cindy. "They can range from creating a portkey to a protection spell to a death curse."

"Very good. Ten points to Gryffindor," said Harry. "And how are they activated?"

The class was quiet for a few moments until Cindy slowly raised her hand again. Harry nodded to her.

"Well, I think it depends on the spell," said Cindy. "In the case of a portkey, it's normally timed. A protection spell is usually perpetual. But I think most depend on a trigger that the castor sets."

"That's right," said Harry. He waved a hand at the blackboard behind him and the names of such spells began writing themselves. "You will all pick a spell, the ones I've chosen are all Dark to borderline Dark, and research it. By next class, you will have what the spell is and what it is usually used for. We'll continue going more in depth after that."

The class studied the board.

"You can use your text books to help you choose," said Harry. "Most of them are at least mentioned in there."

They started flipping through their books with glances at the board.

“What if some of us pick the same one?” said Rufus.

“That’s all right,” said Harry. “And you will be graded on the individual spell. For example, if the spell is very old or not well documented, you’ll be graded on what you manage to dig up. If it’s well-known...” Harry trailed off.

“We better have it covered,” said Missy.

Harry grinned. “Right. Any questions?”

Harry watched them continue to scan their books and whisper comparisons with each other as Voldemort drifted over them.

“Oh, my, no, Miss Larsen,” Voldemort murmured over her shoulder. “Someone of your ability would be more suited to investigate this one.”

Voldemort’s hand drifted over Cindy’s book. Cindy looked down at the text then up at Voldemort.

“The Patron?” said Cindy. “But that’s so easy.”

Voldemort chuckled. “Oh, my dear girl,” said Voldemort. “Haven’t you learned by now that in dealing with Dark forces, nothing is as simple as it may appear.”

Cindy considered him then nodded as it appeared she was suddenly intrigued.

Harry shook his head.

“Ah good choice, Mr. McIves,” said Voldemort as he glanced over at his. Sean looked up at Harry, looking worried.

“Why?” said Sean with apprehension.

“Because it’s obvious to me that Professor Potter is feeling a bit reminiscent,” said Voldemort. He looked over at Harry and lifted his brow. “The Vengeance Curse, Harry?”

Harry smirked at him. "There is more than one application for it, Voldemort."

"Oh, indeed," said Voldemort as he drifted back to his chair and settled into it. "I believe this little assignment of yours will be most entertaining."

Harry shook his head again with a grin for his students. "I'm so glad you approve," said Harry and the bell rang.

The class gathered their belongings, murmuring to each other. It wasn't about the assignment however, but about the demonstration that night and Harry sighed. He heard Malfoy's name mentioned a few times also, once with awe from Dawn Miller, "Malfoy? Is he that blond Adonis that was at the staff table this morning?"

Harry looked at Voldemort as his second year Slytherins came in.

"I guess you were right," said Harry. "He certainly knows how to cause a stir."

Voldemort chuckled. "But Harry, by tomorrow the only talk will be of Professor Potter and yet another talent he is famous for."

Harry sighed. It was true enough. His modesty be damned. "Feel free to gloat," muttered Harry.

Voldemort didn't laugh though. "You are allowed to play, Harry," said Voldemort, then he disappeared as the second years settled into their seats.

Harry stood in front of the gargoyle. He had been a little surprised by the request to see the headmaster before dinner until he had remember Draco's warning.

Will I like it?

I doubt it.

Don't say I didn't warn you.

Voldemort had opted to stay behind, which also surprised Harry.

“Oh, Harry,” Voldemort had said. “I have no desire to converse with Dumbledore.”

“Why?” Harry had asked him. Voldemort had responded blandly so Harry had pushed it. “Are you afraid he’ll gloat about his ‘Golden Boy’ defeating you?”

Voldemort chuckled and drifted over to Harry by his desk. “Ah, Harry, how soon we forget.” He searched Harry’s expression. “It was not Dumbledore’s ‘Golden Boy’ who defeated me,” said Voldemort as he raised a hand and ran his knuckles down Harry’s cheek. “It was my son.”

Since Harry certainly didn’t want to go through that, he merely moved away and left.

Still the gargoyle stared at him. Dumbledore hadn’t given him the password, but Harry had never needed it. Did Dumbledore expect him to-

“Harry.”

Harry startled and swung around. Dumbledore grinned at him, his blue eyes twinkling.

“Not feeling up to your usual hi-jinx?”

“Guess not, Professor,” said Harry.

“Come in.” Dumbledore led Harry up to his inner office and Harry took a seat he was very familiar with.

Fawkes flew to him and settled on his knee, reminding Harry that even if Voldemort wanted to come, he couldn’t. The phoenix’ presence prevented it.

“Hello, Fawkes,” said Harry, stroking his brilliant scarlet plumage. Fawkes looked up at him with sad eyes and began to sing. The song told Harry he had to do what he had to do.

Great.

Harry stared at the phoenix. "It's that bad is it?" said Harry. Fawkes took wing again and perched on Dumbledore's arm briefly before returning to his perch. Harry returned an anxious glance to the headmaster. "Ok," said Harry. "I've been warned. What is it now?"

"Harry, you must understand-"

"Just tell me, Professor," said Harry. "I think I can take it by now."

"Very well," said Dumbledore as he seated himself behind his desk. He offered Harry a tin of sweets, which Harry ignored. "The Ministry of Magic has decided," Dumbledore began, "And it's been approved by the Board of Governors that Voldemort's second rise to power be included in the curriculum."

Well that wasn't so bad. Harry nodded. "I've already been doing that in my classes," said Harry. "Not that I can help it," he muttered.

Dumbledore chose not to hear his comment. "I know, Harry," said Dumbledore. "But they mean the history of it."

Harry frowned. "What do you mean?"

"The whys and the hows, etc."

Harry felt the blood run from his face. "They want it taught how Voldemort manipulated me?" said Harry warily. This is what both Remus and Sirius had warned him about.

"And how you fought it," said Dumbledore.

Harry's stomach clenched and seemed to knot. "How much do they want told?"

"I'm sorry, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Everything."

Harry's stomach felt like it dropped clear out of his body. "B-but what are they using? Nothing's been documented. I know I never-"

"I have documented it," said Dumbledore.

"You?" said Harry breathlessly as his heart followed his stomach. Dumbledore's eyes were intense as they studied him. "I see," said Harry in a monotone voice. "You'll have my resignation in the morning." Harry stood up. "I'll take Voldemort with me."

"Harry," said Dumbledore. "*You* must do the teaching."

Harry looked down at him. "Professor," said Harry. "The memories are painful enough. Voldemort's ghost makes them worse and now you want me to tell the students about it?"

"It's history, Harry," said Dumbledore. "You changed the world, brought order to chaos. The Ministry is organized, the wizarding world is at peace with itself, and with the Muggle world. *You* did that."

"Betrayal did that," said Harry firmly. "I'd prefer my classes not look at me like I'm a monster."

"You did what you had to do, Harry, to save our world."

"Yes," Harry snapped, his anger growing in a way it hadn't for years. "And I should be dead."

"Perhaps, Harry," said Dumbledore. "But you aren't. You've chosen to teach and I have heard only wonderful things of your ability to teach and to bond with your students. Not everyone can do that. Even Madame Hooch is worried that you may usurp her flying classes."

Harry's mouth dropped open. He couldn't think of anything to say and closed it.

"Harry, you are the most powerful wizard in the world." Dumbledore held up his hand when Harry started to protest. "It's true, Harry. Accept it," said Dumbledore. "You should be Minister of Magic or at the very least in the Ministry, but you don't want authority."

"You are the best Seeker Hogwarts has ever seen," Dumbledore went on, "But you don't want the spotlight. You are now probably the wealthiest wizard in England with Voldemort's fortune added to your own, but you never wanted wealth either."

"You chose to teach and you do it well by using your experiences."

Harry felt a familiar sense of foreboding creep over him. Damn Dumbledore.

"My documentation of what happened from the moment you touched the Triwizard cup is second hand, from you and from Severus. Teachers who can teach from first hand experience are a valuable commodity for any school," said Dumbledore. "I do not want to lose you."

Here it comes.

"The rich educational experience you offer the students of this school is immeasurable. As headmaster of this school," Dumbledore's expression was still very serious, "I'd be a fool to let you get away."

Harry blinked at him. *Great, more guilt.* He fell back into the chair, staring with irritation at Albus Dumbledore.

Dumbledore's eyes began to twinkle with humor again. "No, I didn't think you would do that to me."

"Has Voldemort been teaching you his manipulation techniques?" said Harry.

Dumbledore laughed softly but then turned quite serious again. "I know it will be difficult for you, Harry, but you are a strong person, perhaps the strongest individual I know."

Fawkes started singing again and Harry sent the bird a glance.

"I know, I know," grumbled Harry. "I'll do what I have to do." He stood up again. "Always me," he muttered. He looked at Dumbledore pointedly. "Just for the record, Professor," said Harry. "I know where Bulgaria is now."

Dumbledore laughed and Harry left the office. A strangely familiar feeling of helplessness converged on him. Was he going to be forced to relive the nightmare that had been his life for three years? Could he really tell the students how Voldemort had emotionally

manipulated him, tore him apart until Harry hadn't been sure who he was anymore?

"How brave do you feel famous Harry Potter?"

Severus' taunting words echoed in his head. *Was he brave enough?*

Harry felt the burn grow stronger.

"Not now, Voldemort," said Harry, moving slowly through the castle.

Voldemort floated along beside him. "What's wrong, Harry?"

"Nothing," said Harry. "Please go away. I don't feel like talking."

"Harry, you know I can tell when something is troubling you," said Voldemort. "What did Dumbledore want?"

"I told you, I don't want to talk about it," said Harry.

"Stubborn," said Voldemort as he searched Harry's face with his eyes. "You feel trapped again. Tell me."

Blast him. "Voldemort, please."

"You're not helpless anymore, Harry."

Harry stopped and looked up at Voldemort. "Aren't I?" said Harry bitterly. "My very name makes me helpless."

"So change it and go to Bulgaria," Voldemort suggested simply.

Harry couldn't laugh. "But you've shown me that my very nature won't let me do that. Choices, Voldemort," said Harry. "I have trapped myself again. I chose this path." Harry started walking again. "I can't – won't change it now."

"Stubborn," muttered Voldemort. "What does he want you to do?"

Harry said nothing.

"Oh, tell me, Harry. You know I'll find out."

“The details of your second rise to power have become mandated curriculum for the sixth and seventh year classes.”

Voldemort didn't leave Harry's side as he strode toward his classroom and he could feel those red eyes studying him.

“You knew it would happen, Harry,” said Voldemort. “The entire Ministry of Magic was reordered and found peace with itself because you did what you had to do.”

Like a broken record.

“Yes,” said Harry. “And now, because of your noble gesture at death, they want me to relive the nightmare.”

“Can't be easy being Harry Potter,” said Voldemort. “Or anyone could do it.”

Harry sent him a glance and could tell Voldemort was struggling not to laugh.

“Harry,” said Voldemort as they entered the classroom and Harry shut the door. “You know I am right. Who you are and all your experiences has made you the most powerful wizard in the world with the constitution to face anything life throws at you. Some of your most impressive and astounding moments are in your past.”

“So are my most bleak,” mumbled Harry.

“But people know that with success comes pain, with joy comes sadness, with hope comes helplessness,” said Voldemort. “Even the students will understand that.”

Harry fell into his chair behind his desk hoping but knowing Voldemort wasn't done.

“Your integrity exudes from you with every word out of your mouth,” said Voldemort. “Every glare, every sarcastic comment. Your students know who you are, Harry. They are ready to know how you got there.”

"I don't think I'm ready," said Harry seriously.

"You are, Harry," said Voldemort. "I will help you."

Harry almost snorted. "I know, father," said Harry. "*That* is what scares me."

Voldemort chuckled. "Always the cynic, my Harry."

Harry?

WHAT?!

Egad, don't eat me. I guess Dumbledore told you.

He did.

I told you that you wouldn't like it.

Yeah, you called it.

Well shake it off.

Draco, I'm not in the mood.

Come on, you moron. Stop being Harry Potter for an hour and get down here and fight me.

What-

This always cheers you up.

Harry stood up abruptly. *Bloody hell. The duel.*

Right in one. Now hurry up.

Without thinking, Harry raced into his room, changed his clothes then flew down to the fencing classroom to get Sennie. He had just strapped the sheath around his hips and was nearing the Great Hall when voices rose from the other side of a staircase.

"I heard they changed the curriculum," said Missy.

“So did I,” said Cindy. “I heard they *ordered* the teachers to teach the history – the details of Voldemort’s second rise to power.”

“But that would mean that Professor Potter would have to tell us about all those things he keeps telling to Voldemort to be quiet about,” said Sean.

“Yes,” said Cindy. “Or saying ‘we’ll cover that later.’”

“I bet he’s mad,” said Sean. “I’m surprised he hasn’t resigned.”

“Mad?” said Missy. “Do you watch his face, Sean? Those things upset him. Why would he want to tell us about some of the horrific things he’s gone through? He may have saved the world a couple of times but it’s still his life. I for one am surprised he didn’t resign.”

“Missy’s right,” said Cindy. “We’ve seen Voldemort torture him. Who knows what else Voldemort’s put him through. I think it’s rotten of the School Governors to make him tell us.”

“It is rotten,” said Voldemort and Harry heard the students gasp with surprise.

Harry was surprised too. He rubbed his scar absently. In his rush to change, he had lost track of Voldemort.

“But the truth is much more satisfying than ignorance. Harry knows this first hand which is why he hasn’t resigned.”

“Then where is he?” said Sean. “He didn’t show up for dinner.”

“Oh, he’ll be down,” Voldemort assured them, and Harry could hear the smugness in his tone. “Harry is a man of honor.”

“Move along.”

Another teacher had come along. Snape. He shooed the kids back into the Great Hall. Harry took a deep breath.

“Do hurry Harry along, Severus,” said Voldemort.

The burn on Harry’s head disappeared.

Snape muttered something under his breath and sighed. "Come along, Potter. Your public awaits," said Severus, then Harry heard his steps depart as well.

Damn Slytherins. They always seemed to know when he was around.

Harry rounded the corner and could hear Dumbledore quieting the hall.

"I told you he wouldn't show, headmaster," Draco's voice rose loudly.

"Now, now, Mr. Malfoy," said Dumbledore.

"Quit your whining, Malfoy," said Harry as he stepped into the doorway of the Great Hall. "I'm here."

Dead silence eerily settled over the hall.

Show time.

Chapter 9 Defending the Malfoys

Bloody brilliant timing, Harry. Couldn't have planned it better myself.

And you didn't plan it?

I refuse to answer that.

They appraised each other warily across the room, outwardly displaying the open hostility from years ago, while Harry was trying not to laugh. 'Mr. Fashion Sense' was openly appraising Harry's attire.

Nice shirt.

Harry pretended to adjust the cuff. The dark green creation of fitted silk was especially tailored for fencing, with cuffs that buttoned from wrist to elbow.

Thanks. Ginger dresses me now, and she has impeccable taste.

Not that I expect you to know what impeccable taste is, but remind me to compliment her.

"Come in, come in, Professor Potter," said a very excited Jacob Billings. "As you can see, we're ready."

Harry nodded as he stepped into the hall, un-strapping the sheath. He pulled Sennie out and stopped at the Gryffindor table.

"Hold this for me, will you, Mr. McIves," said Harry, holding out his sheath.

The gaping boy reached out a tentative hand. "Er, sure, Professor," said Sean. His eyes fell to the sword and his eyes widened in recognition. "That's, I-I mean, the sword is-"he stammered.

"It's mine," Harry finished for him.

"I knew it. I knew it was you," whispered Cindy almost smugly. "I told you," she hissed at Sean, who was still staring at the sword grasped in Harry's left hand.

Harry grinned at them. "I'll explain later," he said softly and turned to move toward the high, long table set up in front of the staff table.

Sean muttered behind him, "Shut up, Cindy. Bloody know-it-all."

Repressing his laugh, Harry raised his free hand and a set of steps appeared before him. He ascended to the table's surface and continued to walk across it until he reached Draco in the middle.

You all right, Harry?

Harry heard the concern but shrugged it off. He'd deal with his curriculum problem later. Right now, the sword felt damn good in his hand.

Show time!

Draco nodded and Harry felt Draco's thoughts shut off. They knew better than to leave the telepathy open when they fenced.

They both turned toward the staff table and saluted Billings and Dumbledore then faced each other. Before Harry raised his sword, he swept his gaze around the hall until he spotted Voldemort, floating near the Slytherin Table. He saluted him and turned to Draco.

Draco raised a brow.

"Considering he can still put me in agony," said Harry. "I consider him the most important person in the room."

Draco inclined his head. "Good point."

Harry automatically arced his sword in a swing, meeting Draco's, once up and once down then they formally saluted and took their stances. Draco eyed the sword in Harry's hand and his stance. Harry shrugged.

"Ok," sneered Draco. "Be that way." And he struck.

The attack was a fierce one and Harry retreated, blocking his way up the table. Before Draco could shove him off the table's edge, Harry

stepped down one step and thrust up, locking their swords over his head.

“Rusty, aren’t we, Potter?” said Draco with his customary smug smirk.

Harry pushed him away with a thrust. “I just want you to feel you’re doing well,” said Harry.

The sparring continued up and down the table in what Harry would have called a normal practice session but he could tell Draco was getting frustrated. With an irritated growl, Draco swiped his sword twice, once hard enough to knock Harry’s blade aside and once up, sailing beside his ear and sending a tuft of black hair flying.

The tip of Revend pressed into Harry’s throat.

“Damn it, Potter,” snarled Draco. “You’re getting very close to insulting me.”

Harry leaned away from the blade and brought Sennie around to push the sword away.

“How close?” Harry taunted.

Draco swung in anger and Harry locked their swords over their heads.

“Where’s the Potter instinct?” snapped Draco.

“Where’s the Malfoy precision and perfect execution?” Harry calmly retorted.

Draco shoved him away, and they saluted again. This time Harry attacked first, and it took a few exchanges before Draco’s posture righted itself. Gradually, he returned Harry blows with lighting power and Harry knew Draco could win.

“There it is,” muttered Harry with a grin as he stepped back with his left foot.

With a sweeping circular arc, Harry moved Sennie to his right hand and sparring became dueling.

“Better,” said Draco with a grin as he retreated now.

The respectful attentive quiet in the hall became mesmerized silence as the blades clashed. It didn't take long before the entire hall saw why Harry was hailed a Natural.

With a swish and a flick of his wrist, Draco was disarmed. Harry raised his left hand and summoned Revend before it hit someone, holding his sword tip to Draco's throat.

Draco ignored the sharp edge against his neck, his attention on his shirt as he pulled a tattered edge away from his skin.

“That's two shirts you owe me, Potter,” said Draco but he was grinning broadly.

Harry stepped away and tossed Draco his sword.

“Bitch, bitch, bitch,” said Harry.

They clashed blades, one up and one down then saluted each other and turned to the staff table. As they saluted the masters of the hall, the occupants of the room erupted with noise.

“I mean it, Harry,” said Draco. “Are you all right?”

Harry looked back at Draco who was frowning now. He shrugged, summoning two towels from the staff table and handing one to Draco.

“At least I'm not bleeding like a stuck pig,” said Harry.

Harry.

Draco must be worried, if he was able to break into Harry's mind.

Yeah, I'm all right. Dumbledore's as bad as Voldemort sometimes. But-

You'll live. I know.

Besides. Voldemort said he'd help me. Harry met Draco's gaze. Won't that be fun?

Draco snorted. *At least you don't have to start until next term.*

Harry nodded. *Gives me more time to dread the inevitable.* Harry grabbed Draco's arm. *You didn't vote for that, did you?*

Draco yanked his arm away. "Do I look suicidal to you?" said Draco.

Harry smirked and Professor Billings called Draco away to help him with some students. Harry's modesty started creeping up on him again, so he headed for the Gryffindor table to get his sheath. Those three he could deal with, he'd deal with the rest of his students class by class.

"Why didn't you say?" Sean demanded as soon as Harry reached them.

"Sean don't be so stupid," said Cindy, rolling her eyes in a fair impersonation of Hermione.

"What?" said Sean.

"And what was Professor Potter going to say?" said Cindy. "Oh that fantastic fencing phenomenon everyone is talking about happens to be me?"

Harry laughed – had too. "Thank you, Miss Larsen," said Harry. "Couldn't have said it better myself."

Missy laughed too. "You were really great, Professor."

"Thanks," said Harry.

"At first Sean couldn't believe that you could have beaten an Acknowledged Master," Missy continued. Harry sent the boy a glance.

"I couldn't have," agreed Harry.

"Right," said Missy. "That's when we heard Mr. Malfoy taunting you and Cindy laughed at us."

Harry shook his head.

"Yeah," grumbled Sean. "She mentioned right away that you weren't left handed."

"I still can't believe Professor Billings never mentioned Professor Potter," said Cindy.

"I was surprised myself," admitted Harry. "Until I realized that Malfoy was playing one of his games, so I decided to play along."

"He was quite delighted to show us that sword though," said Sean. "He said it's supposed to be Entrapped."

Harry held it out to Sean and Sean gripped it. The hilt instantly tightened around his hand until he let go.

"Wow," said Rufus who had edged over.

"It isn't technically Entrapped anymore either," said Harry. "I was forced to free the snake after-"

"The Vengeance Curse," Sean nearly shouted with realization.

Cindy looked more surprised than Harry.

"You started your assignment already?" said Cindy.

Sean nodded not looking the slightest embarrassed. "After what Voldemort said, how could I not be curious."

Harry laughed again.

"Wait a minute," said Missy. "If you had to free the snake, how come it still won't let anyone use it but you?"

Now Sean looked impressed. "Good question, Missy."

They all looked up at Harry. With a grin, Harry looked down at his sword.

Sennie, come out. I'm finished.

Once again, the hilt exploded with light and the snake erupted to coil around Harry's arm.

Master, it was thrilling to fence again.

"It calls you master?" said Cindy.

"Yes, he does," said Harry. "Sennie has chosen to serve me, inside the sword and out. And after Sean does his research on the curse, I'll tell you why."

Harry grinned as the three of them started grumbling complaints.

"Some crowd," said Sean, indicating the group still massed at the entrance doors. "A lot of people came to see, I guess."

Harry shrugged off the comment as he strapped on his sword belt.

"Whoa, who's the babe?" said Rufus.

"Must be with Mr. Malfoy," said Missy not concealing her jealousy.

"Yeah, maybe" said Sean vaguely. "But she looks sort of familiar."

Harry glanced up to see Draco lean down and kiss the 'babe' on the cheek with a hug. Suddenly Missy was not the only one jealous. Draco said something to her and the woman tossed back her flaming red hair with a golden laugh.

"I'll kill him," growled Harry as he drew his sword again.

Three Gryffindor voices rose to protest, but Harry started stalking toward the group, his students following.

"Take your slimy hands off my wife, Malfoy," said Harry with menace.

Draco grinned and draped an arm around her shoulders. "Or what?"

Harry lifted the sword tip to his throat. "You look pretty suicidal to me right now."

Draco laughed. "Sod off. You can't kill one of the babies' godfather and you know it."

Harry lowered the sword and blinked.

"I thought you had asked him already, Harry," said Ginger. "Really."

Flustered, Harry slid the sword back into its sheath. He heard the snort then felt a hand on his head as he was dragged in for a hug.

"Oh don't be so pathetic, Harry," said Draco. "You know I'm honored."

Harry looked up as he held Draco away. "Watch the hair, you bastard. Do you know how long it takes me to achieve this look?"

Ginger laughed as she put an arm around each of them. "Stop it, both of you," she scolded. "You're scaring the children."

Harry's students didn't look frightened. They looked flabbergasted.

"What happened to the Potter/Malfoy enmity?" said Sean.

"They out grew it," said Ginger still smiling.

"I out grew it," said Draco. "Harry came along kicking and screaming, stubborn moron that he is."

"Shut up, Malfoy," said Harry.

"See," said Draco.

Harry ignored him and finally got around to introducing his wife to the students who had congregated around him. Most of them were Gryffindors although Draco's presence had attracted some Slytherins. They discussed the duel and fencing in general with the flair Draco and Harry had for verbal sparring, which rivaled their own fencing skills.

Even the students noticed it, but it wasn't until after Harry had seen Ginger off and Dumbledore started shooing the students to bed that anyone commented on it.

“That’s certainly one bizarre friendship you have,” said Sean.

Draco snorted. “Friends? We’re not friends,” said Draco. “Are we, Harry?”

“Certainly not,” Harry shot back.

Cindy started to laugh.

“Comment, Miss Larsen?” said Harry.

“So, you’re not friends,” said Cindy logically. “But you’re not enemies. You’ve been rivals since you were in school, you fight and you fence together like you’ve been doing it for years.”

“Don’t forget Quidditch,” Sean piped up. “You were the Slytherin Seeker, weren’t you, Mr. Malfoy?”

Harry started to laugh.

Don’t go there, Harry!

“Right,” fortunately for Draco, Cindy went on. “And you’re the son of a Death Eater.”

Draco sat up. “I beg your pardon,” said Draco indignantly.

Cindy started stammering but Draco wasn’t finished.

He pulled up the sleeve on his left arm revealing the Dark Mark to several very surprised gasps.

Draco, what are doing?

“I won’t be labeled the son of a Death Eater,” said Draco. “Not when I was one.”

“You were never a Death Eater,” said Harry softly. “You were marked because of me.”

“Exactly,” said Draco fiercely. “I won’t be stigmatized when my loyalty was with you and *not* the Dark Lord.”

"I know that," said Harry. "You know I do."

"And now *they* know it too," said Draco.

They did indeed know it now. The remaining three looked completely shocked by Draco's outburst. Harry sighed.

"Ok, quick summation time," said Harry. "When Mr. Malfoy was marked, Voldemort magically linked us. Since Draco's loyalty was with me, we became telepathically connected."

"So you're more like brothers," said Cindy with understanding.

"Well the telepathy sort of capped off a long process of recognition and understanding," said Harry, "But yes, that's it in a nutshell."

The three Gryffindors stood up as Dumbledore approached their table.

"Well, I still think it's bizarre," said Sean.

Harry shrugged. "Call it what ever you want," said Harry. "But nothing in my life has ever been normal anyway, so..."

Sean grinned. "I guess."

They said their goodnights and Harry turned back to Draco who had been strangely quiet. His expression was one of surprise.

What?

You mean that. It sounded like an accusation to Harry.

Good, God, Draco. Don't tell me this is news to you?

"Well, no," said Draco. "I mean, I understood it – accepted it. I just didn't think you would."

Harry blinked at him. "Draco, stubborn, pathetic, Gryffindor moron I might be," said Harry. "But I am *not* stupid – or ungrateful."

Draco stared at him for a few moments in silence.

"Thanks, Harry," said Draco. "I mean it."

"No, Draco," said Harry. "Thank you."

Draco rubbed his left forearm absently. "Sorry about that," muttered Draco. "I hope your little Gryffindors weren't too shocked."

"They'll live," said Harry, glancing around. Noticing they were alone with the exception of a few house elves cleaning up, he magicked them a couple of drinks. "They've seen-

"Bloody everlasting hell," Draco swore suddenly.

Startled, Harry blinked.

"Harry, does he know?" said Draco.

Now completely confused, Harry stared.

"Does Voldemort know, I mean," Draco paused to look around the hall. *Does he know about my father?*

Harry thought for a moment. "No, I don't think so," said Harry. *I know I never mentioned it. I think your father would have mentioned in one of his assessment notes if he'd gotten a visit from Voldemort.*

Draco looked paler than usual.

"What's the matter?"

Harry, you protected my father from the Ministry.

"Yeah, so," said Harry.

Draco shook his head. "And what was the last thing that happened when you showed my father your favor?" said Draco, rubbing his arm again.

Harry frowned, trying to process what Draco was getting at. When Harry had thanked Lucius for teaching him the art of fencing, Voldemort had thought he over did it and...

“He marked you,” said Harry.

Draco nodded. “You know how possessive he is with you,” said Draco. “Don’t you think this is going to royally piss him off?”

“Well it isn’t like I expected Voldemort to come back and haunt me,” said Harry.

“But he has.”

Harry shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. He can’t hurt anyone.”

“Except you,” said Draco pointedly.

“You don’t think he would actually punish me, do you?” said Harry doubtfully. “Not over that.”

“I don’t know what he’ll do, Harry,” said Draco. “No one could ever be sure with him. All I’m saying is that you’d better tell him, and it better be *you* who tells him, and it better be soon.”

Harry nodded. Draco had a point.

“And you better have some very flattering appeasement to offer him,” Draco added.

Harry considered all this on his way up to his rooms. Voldemort met him just inside his classroom and Harry suddenly realized he hadn’t seen or felt Voldemort since the duel.

“Hi,” said Harry, trying to sound casual. “Where did you disappear to?”

Voldemort chuckled. “I found the after-shock less satisfying than I expected, so I found other entertainment.”

“Oh?” said Harry, lowering his hand to the desk so Sennie could slither off.

“Yes,” said Voldemort. “I find lording over the other ghosts vastly amusing.”

Harry shook his head with a smile. "Bet the Bloody Baron just loves that."

Voldemort chuckled. Harry felt the pain in his head build and he looked up as Voldemort moved closer. He looked into those red eyes as a hand raised to his face.

"You made me very proud tonight, Harry," said Voldemort, his knuckles running down Harry's face.

"Thank you," Harry managed. "It was fun."

"Mm, I noticed," said Voldemort, holding Harry's face up with the back of his hand. "You weren't as – what was Draco's term? – rusty, as I would have expected."

Damn. Harry managed a shrug. "I guess it's like riding a bicycle," said Harry. "Or a broomstick."

Voldemort smiled. "You know I knew what you meant."

Harry nodded.

"But yes, you are right," said Voldemort. "Flying and fencing, Harry. You are a Natural."

Harry forced a smile and Voldemort let go. "Good night, Harry."

"Night," said Harry as he watched Voldemort vanish.

"No one touches the boy but me."

"That possessive, is he?"

"I have to be careful with what is mine."

Oh no. What if he knows?

Draco was right. Voldemort was going to go berserk over this. But somehow Harry had always been able to find the right words to appease him in the past. Harry racked his brain, but nothing came to mind.

Draco called it again.

Blood everlasting hell!

Thankfully, Harry had a light class load the next day. He managed to get through most of them between talk of the fencing exhibition and Sennie. Voldemort was quiet most of the day, which only made Harry even more suspicious and paranoid. He gave his most annoying class, his 7th year Slytherins a test just so he wouldn't have to deal with them and he was finished for the day.

He moved into his private rooms and stroked Rowan absently, simply enjoying the total peace. Rowan laid her head on his chest and Harry let the phoenix calm him for several minutes, then he stepped back and took a deep breath.

This is going to be another nightmare.

Harry apparated directly to the foyer of Raven Respite. He was the only person alive who could get through the wards he had set, and even Ginger had to be holding onto Harry to get into the house that way.

House elves converged on him.

"Welcome home, Master Jack," said Dash, his head elf.

"I need to see Master Luke, immediately," said Harry. "In the library."

"Of course, Master Jack," said Dash. "Right away."

Harry strode into the library, leaving the door open while he paced. Several moments later, Lucius Malfoy stepped in wearing a smile that faded as soon as he saw Harry's expression.

"Close the door," said Harry.

Lucius frowned, pushing the door shut behind him. "I don't like the look of this," said Lucius.

Harry waved a hand, muttering a privacy spell.

Lucius' frown got worse. "Now, I really don't like the look of this."

"Listen to me, Lucius," said Harry, his tone bordering on desperate. "I'm not sure how long it'll take before—"

Pain exploded in Harry's head and Harry hit his knees as Voldemort's fingers closed around his jaw.

"Hello, Lucius," said Voldemort, staring into Harry's eyes.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Lucius lower to his knee.

"Master," Lucius choked out. "How? What-? I don't understand."

Voldemort lifted his free hand to silence Lucius, which it did. Then he brought the hand toward Harry's face.

"When were you going to tell me, Harry?" said Voldemort.

"How?" Harry rasped.

"Harry, you know that no one knows you as well as I do," said Voldemort. "I knew the moment you saluted me with the sword in your left hand. You were not skilled enough to face Draco left-handed the last time I saw you, so you must have been practicing."

"I wasn't positive until after we spoke last night." Voldemort smiled knowingly. "Draco said something, didn't he? You wouldn't have even realized..."

Voldemort chuckled then. "How wonderfully naive you can be," said Voldemort wistfully. "I'd almost forgotten. But then, you always needed reminding. The connection," said Voldemort, his hand alarmingly close to Harry's scar. Harry squeezed his eyes closed, gritting his teeth. A tear seeped out the corner of his eye. "Is with me, Harry. No one else."

Voldemort let go and Harry hit the floor.

Vaguely, Harry noticed Voldemort drifting over towards Lucius. Lucius was bade to rise and Voldemort allowed him to ask his question.

Harry remained on the floor as he pulled himself together. Voldemort explained the hows and the whys of their 'current situation,' and Harry could hear Lucius soft comments.

Harry couldn't look at them. He knew Lucius would be scowling at him like he was an idiot. Apparently, Harry was the only one who hadn't known that one could concede a life debt.

"So," said Voldemort. "Now the question remains – oh, Harry, do get up."

Harry pushed himself off the floor and leaned on the desk, still not looking at the others in the room.

"What was your question?" said Harry.

"How is it that Lucius escaped?"

"Portkey," said Harry simply.

Voldemort moved to stand before Harry. Harry didn't look up.

"Do go on," said Voldemort

"Before I left to meet you," said Harry, "I sent out a few letters. I sent Lucius the deed to this house with instructions and made the deed into a Portkey to itself."

Voldemort's hand moved under Harry's face so that Harry would look up.

"Why?"

"I decided he'd be more valuable to me alive," said Harry, trapped under that red gaze.

"Did you?" said Voldemort.

Voldemort was apparently not appeased yet.

"As your son, he was compelled to do as I asked."

Voldemort smirked.

“You want me to believe that you saved Lucius Malfoy from – in all likelihood – a dementor’s kiss because you wanted someone to look after the estate?”

Voldemort’s tone was mildly amused but his expression was intense.

“He is still Draco’s father and Draco and I-“

Voldemort’s fingers on Harry’s face cut him off. His eyes moved over Harry’s expression, flicked down briefly to Harry’s chest then met his gaze again.

“Harry,” said Voldemort, his fingers brushing Harry’s jaw, just keeping contact. “Now tell me the real reason, my son.”

Harry swallowed and closed his eyes against the pain. Voldemort’s hand didn’t move but he maintained the touch. His chest suddenly felt tight. Damn him, he always knew...

“It’s your fault,” Harry managed.

“Mine?” said Voldemort with interest.

Harry nodded slightly, the words falling from his lips. “You gave me everything. Everything I wanted – a family – people I could count on – who didn’t judge me.”

Voldemort raised a brow expectantly.

“Draco, Lucius, Severus.”

“Mm, yes, Harry,” said Voldemort seriously. “My Death Eaters would have done anything to please you. You know that.”

“I couldn’t let the killing start,” said Harry.

“I know, Harry.”

Harry’s knees were shaking. “But-But, I couldn’t let everything go. I couldn’t – wouldn’t lose everything I had with you.”

Voldemort's fingers trailed up Harry's face then. Harry was surprised he was still standing.

"Ah, yes," said Voldemort. "My illustrious plan." Voldemort laughed. "Quite devious, very precarious, utterly brilliant."

"And successful to the bitter end," said Lucius softly.

"Indeed," said Voldemort although he didn't move his eyes from Harry. "You have accepted it, my son. I am pleased."

He pulled his hand away and Harry hit the floor again. God, he hated these power plays.

"I have, father," rasped Harry and he looked up. "Do you?"

Voldemort chuckled. "But I have, Harry," said Voldemort. He sent Lucius a nod and Lucius moved forward and helped Harry up.

Harry regarded him steadily. Yeah, he could tell Voldemort was telling the truth. Harry knew that self-satisfied smirk. Voldemort had given Harry that family, Voldemort had no choice but accept them in Harry's life now.

Voldemort settled into a chair still watching Harry as he dropped into the chair behind the desk and rubbed his hands over his face.

Lucius stood in the middle of room and looked back and forth between them.

"So was this the purpose of this visit, Harry?" said Lucius. "To tell me about the Master?"

Harry looked up. "No offense, Lucius," said Harry. "But he can still punish me. You'll excuse me if you weren't my first priority."

Voldemort chuckled.

"I dare say," said Lucius. "Even you know better than to slight the master. But why come all the way here to inform him."

“Lucius, I’m disappointed,” said Voldemort. Lucius turned to him with a brow raised curiously. “I clearly recall mentioning Draco.”

Lucius inclined his head. “I do recall you mentioning him, my lord,” said Lucius, “But I was – distracted,” Lucius said the word suggestively, “by the fact that you were here.”

Voldemort laughed. “Ah, yes. My exalted presence is known to distract even the best of wizards.”

Harry snorted and Lucius turned to him.

“So what about Draco?” said Lucius. “Have you heard from him?”

Harry nodded. “He’s back at Hogwarts,” said Harry. “He came as soon as he realized the ‘gift’ was working again.”

Lucius’ expression was almost worth the pain Harry had just endured.

“When can I see him?” said Lucius.

Harry sighed, raking a hand through his hair. “I’m still working on that,” said Harry. “If I lose my anonymity here, then so do you.”

Lucius nodded thoughtfully. “Good point.”

“Harry,” said Voldemort. Harry looked to him. “All you need to do is ask.”

Harry blinked. “/s there something you could do?” said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. “As I have demonstrated in the past, my boy. I have my ways.”

AN: as you can see, there were several points in this chapter where I could have left you all hanging with another dreaded cliffhanger. See how nice I really am.

Chapter 10

Inert Spells and Salazar's Talisman

Harry decided to put all those things he was supposed to 'cover' and 'get to' later aside until - well - later. He wasn't even going to think about the change of his curriculum until he had to. But with the Christmas break fast approaching, it took a great deal of energy to *not* think about it. To remedy the problem, Harry put his effort into his assignments for his classes, which had conveniently stretched out over the weeks.

The kids' enthusiasm over the subject was refreshing, and Harry marveled at the effort they were all putting into their presentations. He was proud of them.

Rufus was just finishing up his final findings on the Castigation Curse. He had accurately reported on how spells placed on any item with the intent to punish or scold (which included Howlers) fell into this category.

"These spells," said Rufus. "While only bordering on Dark, because they can be taken to the extreme, are mostly used by parents and, er, teachers - many years ago," he inserted swiftly, "to protect children from hurting themselves and to punish disobedience."

He glanced over at Harry who sat in his own comfy arm chair at the side of the room (where Harry had been observing the presentations) with his class journal on his lap. Harry nodded encouragingly.

"As for counters," said Rufus. "Any adult witch or wizard could break or remove a castigation curse with a simple 'finite incantum'. That is, if they know the spell is on the object to begin with."

"Can you give us any examples?" said Harry.

Rufus nodded looking down at his notes. "Well aside from Howlers, which can't be broken if it's cast by a relative - or someone who has parental prerogative, I imagine," said Rufus dryly getting a few laughs from the class. "Other common uses are heat and shock. Like putting the curse on a knife so if a child picks it up, they will drop it because

it's hot or on a doorknob to keep a child away from a room or a set of stairs."

"And any extremes?" prompted Harry.

"Yes," said Rufus. "I read one case where a teacher cursed a quill so that while doing lines, the words were cut into the back of the student's hand."

Harry nodded, glancing back down at his book. "Any questions?" he invited the class. They didn't have any and Rufus returned to his seat, looking relieved that his report was finished. Harry made a few notes in his book then looked up to the class. "Sean, you're next."

Sean's face actually lit up. "Yes, sir," said Sean, pulling some papers together. "I'm ready."

Draco?

What?

Are you free?

Ah, yeah. I guess. Why?

Sean is going to do his report.

Oh. OK. I'll be right there.

Harry had heard Draco's interest. He had known that Draco wanted some details on the curse but didn't want to be bothered looking it up himself, so Harry had promised to let him know when Sean would give his report.

Sean moved to the front of the classroom and put some of his notes on Harry's desk as he leaned against it. Harry had to marvel at how relaxed and self-assured the boy was. Harry couldn't recall ever being that way when standing in front of an audience.

Until now, that is. It still amazed Harry that he could sit up there and teach now without getting nauseous.

About 30 seconds later, Draco strolled in.

"Don't mind me," said Draco. He walked directly over to Harry and glanced around. After a moment of digging in his robes, he sighed, took Harry's quill from his hand, tossed it onto the floor and transfigured it into a chair. He sat down, looking expectantly at Sean, who merely stared back, and bade, "So educate us, Mr. McIves."

Sean looked at Harry, who sent Draco an irritated glare as he summoned a new quill.

"Just go ahead, Sean," said Harry.

Sean sighed and launched into his report on the Vengeance Curse.

"The Vengeance Curse is actually a derivation of several spells," said Sean. "The basis of the curse is the Vanity Curse which was invented and first cast by Sigmond Lockhart a renowned writer who put the spell on his quill so no one else could use it. It's very similar to Entrapment charms, which fundamentally do the same thing except that they use a secondary element to enforce the curse."

Sean paused to pick up another piece of parchment. "Early recorded examples of cursed items are: clocks, cloaks mirrors," Sean looked up. "I read that the spell on the Mirror of Erised falls under the category of the Vanity Curse as well."

"Really?" said Draco.

"I read that too," Cindy piped up. Harry had known the girl wouldn't be able to sit through too much of *anyone* else's reports without commenting. "But not many people have actually gotten to look into it. It's been said to drive people insane."

Voldemort chuckled. He had been blissfully quiet through most of the reports only making vague remarks. "What do you think, Harry?"

"Yeah, Potter," said Draco with a smirk. "You've seen it."

Suddenly everyone's eyes were on him again. *Bloody hell.*

Harry ignored Draco, who chuckled, having heard the thought.

"You've seen it?" said Cindy. "Did you look into it?"

"Yes," said Harry with a sigh. "And yes, I could concur that it could be a form of the Vanity Curse. Again, as most things, it depends on who is looking into it." He looked back at Sean. "Continue, Mr. McIves."

"Right," said Sean. "Then in 1472, a witch, whose name was never released, cast it on a crystal ball. The curse, cast to keep people from using her glass, caused anyone who looked into it to see their own death."

"Sounds like Trelawney's personal vendetta against me," muttered Harry.

Voldemort chuckled and Draco snorted.

Sean glanced at him with a grin. "Only in this case," said Sean. "A number of the people reportedly died soon after looking into it. No one was able to confirm that they died in the manner in which they saw, but the cases were taken very seriously. And," Sean continued, "that's when it started to become known as the Vengeance Curse, and when it became classified as a Dark curse."

"Although the true Vengeance Curse evolved from the Vanity Curse, it is actually a separate spell because it compounds the Vanity Curse with the use of an enforcer." Sean was obviously getting into his report now. "Most recorded evidences of true Vengeance Curses being used are specifically Slytherin related as they all list the enforcer as being a snake, and they are haunted rooms and entrapped swords."

"But," Sean said and he sent Harry a very knowing look. "There hasn't been any evidence of a true Vengeance Curse being set-off for decades until," he looked down at his notes, "1945," he sent Voldemort a glance, "when a haunted room was opened at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and students were attacked by an unknown monster. Curiously," Sean continued, "the attacks stopped mysteriously but started again in 1993 when the mysteries were revealed, identifying the haunted room as the Chamber of Secrets"

and the monster as a Basilisk. Unofficial reports state that the Basilisk was killed by a twelve year old wizard named Harry Potter," Sean looked up, "but as they're unofficial, I can't verify the validity of that information."

Since Sean had said the entire bit with a perfectly straight face, Harry choked on his own laughter.

Draco clapped Harry on the back a couple of times and smirked at Sean.

"All a bunch of codswallop," said Draco.

"Oh do show some respect, Draco," said Voldemort. "I was quite fond of that serpent."

"Sorry, my lord," muttered Draco as he leaned next to Harry. *All right, Harry?*

Harry could only nod. He finally sat up and took the glass of water Draco offered. "Go on, Sean," said Harry.

"And how could the Chamber of Secrets be classified under the Vengeance Curse?" Missy wanted to know.

But Sean was ready. "When Slytherin was forced out, his pureblood vanity was against muggle-borns, the trigger was his heir opening the chamber and the enforcer was the Basilisk," said Sean.

"Very good, Sean," said Harry, looking down at his journal.

Sean frowned. "I'm not done," said Sean and he looked back at the class and continued before Harry could interrupt. "The last instance of the Curse being set-off was again here at the school. Almost eight years ago, an ancient Entrapped sword by the name of Verwan, which was cursed by its original wizard, was defeated by a fencer who also happened to be using another Entrapped sword. In this case, the trigger was being defeated and the enforcer was the unwilling snake entrapped in the victor's sword.

"According to the records," said Sean and he looked at Harry, "And these *are* official, the loser of the duel was an Acknowledged Master named Terrance Vandewater and the unwilling snake, entrapped in a sword and known as Sennie, was forced to bite the winning fencer." Sean was grinning again. "Oh, and the fencer was," he dramatically looked at his notes again, "a seventeen year old wizard named Harry Potter."

Yup. There goes that modesty. Right out the window. Nice shade of red-

Shut up, Draco.

"Bravo, Mr. McIves," said Voldemort, gaining the classes attention. "Very well done."

Sean beamed.

"Wait a minute," said Cindy and she turned to Harry. "Sennie bit you?"

"Yes," said Harry. "As Sean has accounted, the Vengeance Curse, when done properly, is a powerful Dark curse. It is deadly."

"That's the part I don't understand," said Sean. "And you did say that you would tell us. How did you survive?"

Harry stood up and moved back to the front of the classroom. Sean went back to his desk.

"Professor," said Sean as he sat down. "From what I read, the caster would have had to have put pretty explicit parameters on the curse for it to work at all, especially after so many years."

"There *were* specific parameters, Mr. McIves," said Voldemort. "Very specific." Voldemort chuckled. "In the end it all boiled down to Harry's..." Voldemort trailed off.

Harry couldn't remember ever seeing Voldemort at a loss for a word. "I think the word you're looking for is 'luck'," said Harry.

The class laughed and Voldemort made a comment about Harry cynicism. Harry then explained that the curse worked on him because he was part Slytherin and had an entrapped sword. And he informed them that he lived because he *was* only *part* Slytherin, his Gryffindor blood had keep him alive long enough to free Sennie so that Professor Snape could make the antidote for the venom.

"Sean," said Harry. "What are the counters?"

"Well, since there are so few recordings of a true Vengeance Curse being triggered, there hasn't been any firm counters speculated," said Sean. "Although I could theorize that speaking parseltongue may be an aid to surviving one, if not a counter."

Harry nodded thoughtfully and paced several steps. "Although in the Chamber of Secrets, speaking parseltongue granted me entrance to the chamber, it did not help at all with the basilisk. It only obeyed Tom."

"Tom?"

Harry looked up then over at Voldemort who had spoken. "He was the boy I was dealing with at the time," said Harry. "I don't suppose you have a memory of fighting me when you were 16?"

"No, Harry," said Voldemort. "You were *dealing*," Voldemort chuckled at the word, "with a memory of me. My own memory of myself."

"Quite taken with yourself, weren't you?" said Harry with half a grin.

Voldemort laughed. "Was I?"

"Tell us, Professor," said Cindy breathlessly.

"What happened?"

Come on, Harry. You can't leave it at that.

Harry glanced over at Draco, then looked at Voldemort. Voldemort lifted his brows.

"I'm curious, Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry sighed and hopped onto his desk. "Well, after he got Ginger to open up-

"Ginger?"

"Yes," Harry told Voldemort who looked surprised. "Didn't you know?"

"I did not," said Voldemort. "How could I?" He couldn't suppress a smirk. "I can see where some of her hostility comes from now."

"Yes, well," he turned back to the class, "After Ginger had regaled all of my exploits to Tom Riddle, he became increasingly interested in me. It wasn't until I met him down in the chamber that he admitted he was heir of Slytherin and that he had planned to continue Salazar's noble work. But," Harry took a breath, "he started going on and on about how he couldn't believe that I, as a baby with no extraordinary magical talent could have stopped the greatest sorcerer in the world."

"Ah the arrogance of youth," said Voldemort fondly.

Harry sent him a smirk. "Anyway, he told me that after finding out about me that he knew had to meet me. He said that killing muggle-borns wasn't important anymore."

Draco snorted. "I can see where this is going," said Draco with a grin.

The class murmured in agreement and Harry had to smile.

"Yeah, that's right," said Harry. "He decided he had to kill me, and then he admitted that he had already taken up his new name."

Then just as Tom Riddle did in the chamber, Harry showed the class. Waving his hand, Harry stroked out the name:

Tom Marvolo Riddle

Then he waved his hand again and the letters rearranged.

I am Lord Voldemort.

"Wasn't I the clever one?" said Voldemort.

The class laughed but Harry frowned.

"Oh, indeed," said Harry. "Clever enough to use an old diary and suck the life out of an innocent girl to become alive again." Harry looked at the class. "Can any of you image the kind of paradox which would have occurred if both Tom Riddle and Lord Voldemort existed?"

The class was silent but Draco spoke up.

"Actually, it would have been brilliant."

Harry looked over at Draco. "Oh?"

"Yes," said Draco. "Neither entity was entirely human. Voldemort's skill of possession was still working. He could have simply possessed himself and..." Draco trailed off suggestively.

"True, Draco," said Voldemort. "The only flaw with that plan would be the dominance issue. Two like minds, with the same strength of will would have been debilitating. Unless we had found a way to merge then it would have driven anyone insane."

"In other words," said Harry unable to repress his smile. "You wouldn't have been able to live with yourself."

The students laughed and Voldemort smirked.

"Very amusing, Harry," said Voldemort.

"If he had the Amulet of Quetzalcoatl," said Cindy. "He may have been able to do it."

The whole class looked at the girl and she lifted her chin defiantly. Harry scowled as he looked at her, racking his brain.

"Oh, yes," he said finally. "Patron Charms." He glanced at his watch. "All right, Miss Larsen," said Harry sliding off his desk again. "Explain it to us."

Cindy leapt up from her desk with excitement as she collected her notes. She moved to the front of the room as Harry returned to his chair. He sent Draco a glance.

I guess you're staying.

Oh, yes. This is fascinating. Smart kids.

"There are, of course, a wide variety of Patron Charms," Cindy began. "Most of them are simple protection charms as well as wards against 'the evil eye' or other such bad luck omens. But," said Cindy, now with excitement. "The spell can take on a darker aspect depending on the power and the - well - nature of the caster's intent."

Voldemort chuckled. "How very delicately put, Miss Larsen."

Cindy flushed but went on. "Some of items charmed in this way have the potential to 'cheat death.'"

"Cheat death?" said Rufus. "How?"

"That particular capability is said to be one of the properties of the Amulet of Quetzalcoatl, which is one of the two most famous items charmed with very powerful Patron Charms. It is said to give the bearer the normal protection properties as well as the ability to detect deceit, have healing powers and, in some circumstances, have a some sort of power over life."

"How so?" quizzed Harry.

"No one can be sure of the actual details," said Cindy, looking disappointed that she couldn't find the answers. "But it allegedly has to do with how the person in possession of the Amulet received the Amulet."

"How do you mean?" said Draco.

"Well, the way it was given and received," said Cindy. "It apparently doesn't work unless it's given with specific intent."

"What kind of intention?" said Harry curiously.

Cindy reddened. "Er, not the intention. The key word is gift. It has to be given freely, thereby relinquishing, basically implementing the power of the Amulet."

"Ah," said Sean. "So if it's stolen-"

"Or found," said Missy, cutting him off.

"Right," said Cindy. "It won't work."

"HAH!" said Draco with amusement.

What?

Since everyone looked at Draco, he merely waved his hand in dismissal. "Sorry," muttered Draco.

Draco?

"But the Amulet is a myth," said Missy.

Draco snorted. "Yeah, so was the Chamber of Secrets," said Draco. "But ask the key players of this room how mythological that was."

Cindy blushed. "Well still, there aren't any known records of the Amulet, only written references to it, mostly ancient Aztec text, and several very obscure sketches of it, which are almost impossible to get a hold of."

"Perhaps," said Draco, aloud so the class could hear. "But I doubt the Ministry of Magic would have a team of researchers handy just in case it happens to be found, if someone didn't think there was some truth to the myth."

The class all appeared impressed with the knowledge, and Draco didn't look the least perturbed that he was revealing Ministry secrets.

Draco?

Use your head, Harry. It means that if the Ministry does find the bloody thing, it won't work. That is, if the girl's research is accurate.

Oh, I'm quite sure it is.

Good. An artifact of that potential power is better off in a museum, useless, than in the hands of the wrong witch or wizard.

"Of course, anything is possible," Cindy went on, defending her report. "But without any hard evidence-"

"So, Miss Larsen," said Voldemort. "How could this miracle of stone have helped me?"

"Well," said Cindy enthusiastic again. "Since the Tom Riddle that Professor Potter faced was technically a memory, I would have to assume that it was a soulless entity, meaning he was 'whole.' If the Amulet was empowered, it could have been used to 'merge' your, er, well, being, with the substance of the memories re-established body."

"Interesting," said Voldemort.

"Of course," said Cindy. "That would be assuming the thing is real and was in your possession-"

"We get the idea, Cindy," Harry intervened. "Go on. And the second example?"

"Right. The second is," she sent a glance to Voldemort. "Salazar's Talisman."

Harry looked at Voldemort and raised his brows. Voldemort only chuckled.

"Salazar's Talisman is said to carry the classic properties of the Patron Charm, the predominate ones being the protection wards and the deceit detection, and, of course, Salazar being such a powerful wizard, the piece is obviously very magically potent."

"Go on, Miss Larsen."

Cindy glanced again at Voldemort. "Yes, as I'm sure you know, Salazar was very possessive."

Voldemort chuckled again.

"As with his Chamber, he made sure that only descendants of his own blood could access the properties of the talisman," said Cindy.

"So, basically, it's just a medallion unless you're an heir?" said Sean.

"Well, any descendent actually," said Cindy. "I surmise, it would just be stronger, more potent, for an actual heir."

All eyes moved to Voldemort.

"At the present time," said Cindy. "Its whereabouts are unknown."

Voldemort laughed out loud at that. It seemed that no one was brave enough to ask.

Will you ask him already? You know he'll tell you and I want to know.

Harry sighed. *Voldemort doesn't have it.*

How do you know?

Because I think I know where it is. Harry was actually pretty sure he knew.

"Er, Lord Voldemort?" Sean's curiosity had overcome his trepidation. Leave it to his Gryffindors. "Have you ever seen it?" said Sean.

Voldemort was smiling with satisfaction. "Of course, I have, Mr. McIves," said Voldemort. "It was in my possession. Handy little trinket." His amusement was obvious as well. "No one could lie to me, even if they had the audacity to try."

Harry shook his head but couldn't help his grin. So that's how he was always able to tell.

"Don't be silly, Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry looked up. Voldemort was watching him as if reading his thoughts again.

"I never needed to use it with you."

"Oh," said Harry.

"Despite the fact that you were one of the few people brave enough to try to lie to me, you were simply miserable at it. And later, I simply knew you too well," said Voldemort.

Harry suppressed a laugh. Draco snorted then choked.

Voldemort cast his red gaze on him. "Comment, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Well, no," said Draco. "It's just that Snape-"

Voldemort's laughter cut him off. "Draco, my boy, still the idiot?"

Harry instantly saw Draco tense.

Let it bounce off, Draco.

Voldemort went on. "Everyone knew Severus was a spy for both sides. He told me everything he knew, which was everything Dumbledore allowed him to know. And vice versa. He didn't need to lie. Besides," said Voldemort. "At that point, I had completely changed my tactics." He sent Harry a smug glance. "Severus had a very specific task. There was no need for him to deceive me."

"So, er, about the talisman," said Sean, looking back and forth between them. "Where is it now?"

Voldemort brows rose expectantly. "You know where it is, don't you, Harry?"

Harry sighed as the class looked to him. Reaching to his throat, he pulled at the chain and drew the medallion out from under his robes.

The class gasped. Cindy looked as if she wanted to jump forward to see it, but contained herself. Draco didn't bother restraining himself. He reached between their two chairs and took it from Harry's hand.

"That's the Talisman?" said Draco, studying it.

Voldemort chuckled.

Harry met Voldemort's red gaze. "Is this why you never lied to me?"

Voldemort sighed patiently. "Harry, if you recall, I didn't give that to you until you were 17."

Harry nodded.

"I chose not to lie to you, Harry," said Voldemort. "Because I wanted you to trust me."

This conversation was starting to smack of 'new curriculum' information and Harry still didn't think he was ready. He pulled the medallion away from Draco, as the chain had started to dig into his neck, and stood up.

"It isn't like you haven't seen it before, Malfoy," said Harry as he moved towards the front of the room.

"I know," said Draco. "But I never realized what it was." He looked at Voldemort and stated the obvious. "It isn't a snake."

Harry motioned to the class and they slowly came forward to look at the magical necklace, held firmly in Harry's palm.

Several students made concurring comments as they looked at the talisman and returned to their seats.

Voldemort chuckled. "My dear boy," Voldemort addressed Draco. "Salazar Slytherin may have had a rather extensive fixation with snakes but he also had a great fascination with many magical creatures," said Voldemort. "And the phoenix is one of the most magical."

The students had all returned to their seats, including Cindy, and Harry was again seated atop of his desk. Harry's attention was fixed back on his medallion as he fingered the lettering impressed on the back.

Cindy, of course, was very knowledgeable on phoenix' as well. "Of course, their tears of healing and regenerative capabilities, their ability to carry heavy loads and their ability to manipulate fire in all its aspects and forms," she expounded. "And they can never die."

"That isn't exactly true, Miss Larsen," said Voldemort. "They have themselves conquered death, they possess an understanding of death, being keepers of death's secrets, which is why a ghost can not share the same confined space as a phoenix, but they can be killed, or die, as it were."

Cindy frowned. "How?"

"Simply," said Voldemort. "The phoenix can save a life if it *chooses*," he spared a glance at Harry, "Or if ordered - by the person it *chose* to sponsor, within one hour of the passing life. But, if the phoenix surrenders its entire life force, then it will expire."

"But-"

"Miss Larsen," said Voldemort. "Take Harry's Rowen for a prime example. You've all seen her go through her stages already." He chuckled. "Indeed, it hasn't been easy for her to be Harry Potter's phoenix. But she has yet to expend more magic than she has to heal him. He doesn't expect her too, which is why despite her help, Harry still suffers remnants of 'our connection.' But needless to say, if Harry had ever actually died, and she was not at her full strength, she could, if she chose, surrender her life force and save him."

"But then she would die," said Missy.

"If she wasn't at full strength," said Voldemort. "Or if he had lost more life than her abilities could restore, meaning he had been dead over an hour and/or his soul had passed. Correct. It would take forfeiting her own life force to recall his soul and restore his body."

"Well, I'm rather fond of Rowen," said Harry, forcing some levity into the subject. Talking about his own death was getting old. "So I will endeavor to keep on living."

"Be sure you do," said Voldemort.

The bell rang and the students slowly started getting their stuff together. Their attention though was on Harry.

Harry dropped the talisman back under his robe and looked over at Voldemort with a smirk. He had expected Voldemort's expression to be amused. It wasn't.

"Oh? Why?"

Voldemort drifted over to Harry's desk, just outside the flinch zone. "Our connection, Harry," said Voldemort. "I am here because you are. When you die," he paused to smirk, "you will indeed, take me with you."

Harry sighed and shook his head. "My life is a nightmare," muttered Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. "Harry, I'm hurt."

The next class started to come in and the Gryffindors were forced to give up their seats. Harry prodded them out, praising their efforts.

"See you at dinner," Draco called from the door.

Harry waved and looked back at Voldemort.

"I will see you later, Harry," said Voldemort.

"Where-"

"I have things to do."

"What-"

"Christmas break, Harry," Voldemort reminded him with a grin.

"Oh," said Harry. Voldemort was arranging the 'reunion.'

"Just ask, Harry."

Harry pulled out his notes. "No, Voldemort," said Harry. "I'm quite sure, I do not want to know 'your ways.'"

Another chuckle. "Always the cynic, my Harry."

The remainder of the week went fairly uneventfully. The castle was decorated with it's usual Christmas flourish and spirits were high and jovial as the break approached. The holidays were planned, much to Harry's relief, without his participation. Christmas Eve and morning he and Ginger would spend together at their house, Christmas night they would spend with the Weasleys' and after that, Harry and Ginger would spend some 'relaxing' time at the retreat house in Bulgaria.

Ginger had sent him the tentative itinerary as well as several papers to sign. He was damn sure he didn't know what was going on and bloody glad that Ginger could handle everything from her end. Times like these, it didn't bother him a bit that no one told him anything. He was satisfied to blissfully embrace ignorance, knowing Ginger had it covered.

Draco had laughed at him as he signed the papers.

"Aren't you going to read them?"

"Nope," Harry had said. "I just have to make sure I sign the right name." He couldn't help smirking as he penned the name Jack Taylor on an order for a surplus of household supplies (apparently it was going to be some party), and Harry James Potter on several other papers as indicated by Ginger's notes.

Harry was actually looking forward to the holidays now that they were upon them. He walked into the Great Hall for the feast and it instantly went silent.

Great.

A glance around showed nothing out of the ordinary. Several people were grouped in front of the staff table, but other than that, everything appeared normal for a feast before the holiday.

The meal had been served but everyone was now looking at Harry - expectantly.

Draco, what's going on?

I swear, I didn't do it.

Bloody hell. Tell me-

"Ah, Professor Potter," someone said, might have been Dumbledore.

The group before the staff table separated and Harry looked first to Dumbledore, whose eyes were twinkling. His gaze moved over the others: Snape, McGonagall, Draco, three older, distinguished looking wizards, Billings and -

Terrance Vandewater.

Chapter 11

To Be a Master

What's Vandewater doing here?

I swear, Harry. I had nothing to do with this.

Harry slowly approached the group. Billings was bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet. Harry tried not to notice.

"Harry, come here, my dear boy," said Dumbledore.

As Harry reached them, his eyes darted around at the faces. Expressions were mixed. Draco looked like he had swallowed one of Severus' more vile potions; Dumbledore looked as pleased as Voldemort usually did when Harry had done something he had expected; McGonagall looked breathless, Billings looked enthralled.

Snape's expression said, 'Serves you right.'

Nope. This didn't look good.

Harry dared a glance at Vandewater. He looked - well - eager.

The strangers beamed at him and Harry felt a familiar sensation of having a trapdoor beneath him about to open.

"Harry," said Dumbledore. "This is Acknowledged Grand Master Simeon Curio."

Harry's gaze shifted back to one of the distinguished looking men and he couldn't help the thrill that shot through him at the very thought of meeting the fencing mogul.

The Grand Master didn't appear half as old as Harry would have expected. His salt and pepper hair was as long as Dumbledore's but it was pulled back neatly with a clamp of some sort. He didn't sport a beard; so the lines on his face were clear although Harry wasn't sure if they were wear from age or from weather. The tanned face crinkled even more as the man's smile grew.

Harry quickly held out his hand.

"Grand Master Curio, it's an honor to meet you," said Harry with heartfelt reverence.

Simeon Curio shook Harry's hand.

"I assure you, Professor Potter, that honor is mine," said Curio. "You are, of course, a legend."

"Yes, well," said Harry with a grin. "Everyone knows that legends are shrouded in myth."

Curio continued to smile as he shook Harry's hand.

"Ah, Harry, my cynic. Such modesty."

Harry quickly glanced around as Voldemort chuckled.

"No, Harry. No one can see or hear me."

"I must apologize in the delay in responding to your application, Mr. Potter," said Curio.

"My application?"

"Yes," said Curio. "It seems there was a slight delay in getting all the documented facts. Once this last recommendation came to my attention, well..."

He trailed off as if Harry should understand. Harry, however, was even more confused.

"I'm sorry, sir," said Harry. "Application? Recommendation?"

Grand Master Curio pulled a scroll from his robe and unrolled it. Glancing at the parchment, he said, "You are Harry James Potter?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"And you studied the art of fencing under a recognized swordsman?"

"Er - I-" Harry glanced at Draco. "I studied under Lucius Malfoy."

"Grand Master," said Draco, stepping forward. "My father, Lucius Malfoy, is a recognized swordsman."

Curio nodded. "Yes, Yes. I have his credentials." To Harry, "He graduated you, did he not?"

"Er-"

Once again Draco spoke up. "Harry was presented with his sword."

Again, Curio nodded. "And you have been tested by an Acknowledged Master?"

Harry sent Vandewater a suspicious glance.

"Yes," said Harry.

"Then everything is in order," said Curio, rolling up the scroll. "All these qualify you to apply for consideration of Acknowledgment."

"But-"

"And it's been documented that you have already fulfilled one requirement of Acknowledgment."

"Er-"

"You disarmed an Acknowledged Master in an honorable duel," said Draco.

"Is this untrue?" said Curio, curiously.

"Ah, no," said Harry. "It's true."

The Grand Master then picked up another scroll and handed it to Harry. "Is this your signature?"

Harry took the scroll and looked down at it. It was headed "Application for Consideration for Distinction in Fencing - Class: Acknowledged Master" and at the bottom...

Harry's eyes widened.

"But-" he looked around. "But, I didn't. I mean, I never-"

"Stuttering, Harry?"

Harry ignored Voldemort.

"Harry," said Dumbledore, clearly urging seriousness although his eyes were still twinkling. "Try to remember. Did you-"

"No," said Harry softly. Everyone knew him. They knew he never asked for any sort of recognition.

"Yet that appears to be your signature," said Dumbledore.

Harry looked again at the familiar scrawl. It damn well *did* look like his signature.

"I could cast a forgery identification charm on it, if you would like, Professor Potter," said Snape with a grin the reminded Harry of many years of *How brave do you feel, famous Harry Potter?*

Harry had passed confusion now and was down right confounded. Dumbledore's eyes were still twinkling.

Draco?

I told you. I had no part in this.

"Grand Master Curio," said Dumbledore. "Didn't you mention a recommendation?"

"Yes," said Curio. "Of course the original recommendation was filed years ago," he pulled out several more scrolls, "And it could not be followed up until we received an application. Now that we have your application..." Curio seemed to be rambling off the facts as if still apologizing for taking so long. "You being who you are - well - that would have been enough but then with the new recommendation... Well you can understand, pressure from so high-"

Tired of the wizard's hedging, Harry snatched the scrolls and looked down at them. The more recent one was dated only that week and was signed by the Minister of Magic himself. That explains pressure from high up. Arthur Weasley would gladly sign...

Harry quickly looked at the original recommendation.

Virginia Abigail Weasley.

That trap door opened as Harry read his wife's praise from his seventh year. Even back then, she had urged him to apply. "Harry, fencing is something you do for you. It has nothing to do with Voldemort or your father. It's all *you*," she had said.

Ginger. I'll kill her.

You will not. But maybe you'll pay attention to what you're signing from now on.

Harry looked over at Draco. *You did know about this.*

Oh, no. This piece of brilliant manipulation was all her.

"That *is* your signature," said Dumbledore. "Isn't it, Harry?"

Harry swallowed. "Oh, um, yeah. Now I remember."

Simeon Curio beamed again. "Very good. Then everything is in order." He took back the scrolls and returned them to his pocket then introduced the other men with him.

He greeted Acknowledged Master Payne and Associate Master Grant.

"Associate Master?" said Harry shaking the wizard's hand. The man appeared younger than the others in years but his bearing, his entire demeanor gave the impression of age, wisdom.

Grant inclined his head. "It is an honorary title," he said.

"William is Keeper of the Rolls," Curio informed. "It is privileged position that demands the same degree of honor and worthiness as an Acknowledged Master if not the level of sword skill."

Harry nodded his understanding. "So what do I have to do?"

"To acquire acknowledgment," said Curio. "You need only disarm two Acknowledged Masters. As you have already defeated Master Vandewater, you can choose to duel Master Payne or Master Vandewater for a second time, which will count as two wins."

One glance showed why Vandewater looked so eager. The man seemed positively hungry to fight Harry again.

"And if I lose?" said Harry.

"It depends on how many times you wish to duel," said Curio. "We are here for the evening. You can keep dueling tonight until you win or you can reschedule a duel for another time. There is no limit on the number of fencing matches it takes. An Acknowledged Master is required to accommodate any applicant as many times as the applicant wishes."

"Oh," said Harry, sending Vandewater a smirk.

"That courtesy is only given to applicants for consideration," said Vandewater. "An Acknowledged Master is under no such obligation to fight anyone else."

Unless the Master orders him that is.

Harry barely repressed his snort at Draco's comment. So Vandewater really *hadn't* had to fight Lucius back in their seventh year. But Voldemort had told him to - because Harry had asked.

"Or," Master Payne spoke up. "You can fight Master Curio."

Harry's eyes turned back to the Grand Master. "Really?" said Harry.

Curio was smiling again. "Yes," he said. "The parameters of fighting me for Acknowledgment are simple. You need only last in a duel with me for a specific time frame."

"What's the time frame?" said Harry.

William Grant looked at a scroll. "Time is set at twenty minutes. The record is thirty-three minutes 12 seconds set by Acknowledged Master Sheridan."

"That was a duel," murmured Curio fondly.

"Yes, Silas is truly gifted," said Vandewater.

The compliment from Vandewater surprised Harry but he guessed Vandewater did appreciate those talented in the art.

"So, Mr. Potter," said Curio. "What is your pleasure? You *do* wish to fight tonight, don't you."

"Um, er-" Harry glanced around again. "Yes. I mean, I guess so."

"Wonderful," said Curio. "I look forward to seeing you fence."

Billings was jumping up and down again. Again Harry ignored him.

"Who do you wish to fight?" said Vandewater with unmistakable hope.

Harry turned back to the Grand Master. "I'd very much like to duel with you, sir," said Harry.

Reactions varied. Snape smirked as he helped Billings to a seat. Most of the others looked surprised. Simeon Curio laughed.

"Very well, Professor," said Curio. "We will meet back here in half an hour."

Harry inclined his head and offered a smile. "Thank you, Grand Master."

With as much flourish as he could, Harry turned and strode out of the hall, vaguely noting that several people followed. He didn't stop until he was inside the fencing classroom.

"Harry, what ever possessed you to pick Curio?"

Harry took his sword off the wall and turned to Draco. Sean was with him. Voldemort was with them too, but he was still invisible.

"It seemed the obvious choice to me," said Harry, pulling off his robe. "All I have to do is hold onto my sword for twenty minutes and I'm done." He met Draco's stare. "I can do that. You know how stubborn I am."

"Well yeah," said Draco. "I'm just surprised that you want this now."

Harry sighed. "After all the work Ginger went through to get me to do this, I have to."

"Why?" said Sean.

Harry glanced at him and snorted. "Well for starters, I'd rather not have my wife pissed at me," said Harry. "But mostly because she's carrying and will give birth to my children. If she wants me to do this that badly, then I'll damn well do it."

"Oh Harry, call it what it is," said Voldemort. "You simply don't want the guilt."

Harry smirked. "That too," said Harry. He looked down at his cracked sword hilt then looked across the room at Voldemort. "I don't suppose you could pop up to the classroom and tell Sennie to come down?"

Voldemort chuckled. "Are you asking?"

Sean glanced around. "Why don't you just summon him?"

Draco laughed. "Oh, do, Harry. I'd love to see what happens when a pissed off three foot asp comes flying through the halls of the castle."

An hour later, Harry still had a grip on his sword.

The hall had been converted, for all intensive purposes, into an arena of sorts with

the dueling table, which had been enlarged, in the center and the spectators around in tiered seats. It reminded Harry of a miniature coliseum but he hadn't had time to think about their perimeters. As soon as he faced Curio with his sword, everything else went away.

Harry vaguely heard Grant announce "time" but he didn't want the duel to end. It was the most exhilarating battle he'd experienced. The Grand Master moved with a graceful power that was disillusioning. If Harry took anything for granted or underestimated any move, Curio would have had him.

The match challenged not only his physical stamina and instinct, but also his mind. He was making snap judgment moves and counter-moves continuously.

Breathing hard and sweating, Harry changed hands again and stepped backwards underneath their blades to keep from being cornered. Then he swept another arc to switch back to his right hand and attacked again, forcing Curio to retreat across the table.

After several more exchanges, Curio locked their blades in the air. The Grand Master looked as breathless and exerted as Harry.

"You won't let go, will you Mr. Potter?"

"Sorry, sir," said Harry, but he couldn't help his smile. "Stubbornness."

Curio grinned back. "William, time?" he called.

"Fifty three minutes, Grand Master."

"Mr. Potter will not relinquish his arm," Curio announced. "He won't be forced. Call it, Master Payne."

"Draw, Grand Master," said Payne.

"Master Vandewater, call it," said Curio.

"I concur. Draw."

Grand Master Curio stepped back, away from the exchange and brought his sword up to salute. "The match is called, Mr. Potter," said Curio. Harry saluted somewhat puzzled. "It is a draw."

He moved the sword into his left hand and stuck out his right. "Congratulations, Acknowledged Master Potter."

Harry slowly reached out and took the other man's hand. The hall erupted into cheers.

Still somewhat overwhelmed, Harry was pulled away from the table and he felt more than saw the hall returned to its normal state. The acclaim began. It seemed Harry had set a new record against the Grand Master. All the Masters (save Vandewater who had smugly suggested that he had known Harry could do it) were impressed. Vandewater even implied that given more time, Harry may have even won the match.

Grand Master Curio merely smiled serenely but didn't comment.

A body slammed into his own at considerable force and arms wrapped around his neck.

"Oh, Harry, you were brilliant."

Harry didn't have a chance to berate Ginger on her little scheme as more of his friends came over to echo their own praises. Surprised by how extensively Ginger had put the thing together, Harry simply relaxed and let the party swirl around him.

Just this once, he guessed he could stand being the center of attention. After all, it was his skill, not his name that had gained the admiration and respect of all present. Harry supposed it was ok to show off every once in a while.

"It was fun," said Harry as he bid goodbye to most of the remaining guests.

"Easy for you to say," said Draco as he moved into a seat beside Harry. Now that the hall was emptying out, there was room around the new 'Acknowledged Master.' "I couldn't have done it."

Harry merely shrugged.

"You're not mad, are you, Harry?" said Ginger softly, her lips brushing his ear.

In response, Harry yanked her onto his lap. "Not really," Harry admitted. "More surprised than anything else. Not to mention impressed. I can't believe you managed to get everyone here without me knowing."

Ginger smirked. "What can I say? I've become resourceful."

"And sneaky," said Draco.

"Very Slytherin," said Snape who was now looming over Draco, staring down at them in his imposing way.

"Carrying the heirs has its advantages," Voldemort spoke up for the first time since before the duel. "Doesn't it, Mrs. Potter?"

Harry noticed the grin Ginger sent Voldemort and almost shuddered.

"I just wish my father had been here to see it," said Draco wistfully.

"Oh, do tell him, my dear girl," said Voldemort sounding bored.

"He was here," said Ginger.

Harry blinked but Draco sat up with interest.

"What?" said Draco. "When? How?"

Ginger was smiling at Harry. "It seems," announced Ginger. "That carrying the heirs enables me to apparate on Hogwarts grounds. And," she added, "It gives me the strength to get through your wards at Raven Respite - with another person."

"Lucius was here?" said Harry softly. The impact of Ginger's supplemented powers due to her pregnancy not nearly as significant for him as the fact that his teacher had seen him earn the rank of Acknowledged Master.

"Yes, Harry," said Ginger still smiling.

Draco cuffed Harry's back. "How sweet is that?" said Draco.

"Happy Christmas, Harry," said Ginger.

At least I didn't leave you with a cliffhanger. This marks the half-way point of this fic. Please review with any comments you may have. I love and appreciate them all.

Chapter 12

A Slytherin Christmas and the New Curriculum

The holidays were flying by. Harry and Ginger's Christmas morning was an intimate affair of exchanging silly presents and breakfast in bed. They spent a pleasant day with the Weasleys at Bill's new place and had a wonderful visit with Sirius and Gwenn at La Casa Black.

Remus joined them for dinner one night accompanied by a young woman named Belle who seemed quite taken with him. Although Remus tried to insist she was merely a friend, Harry could clearly tell that they really liked each other.

The final couple of days before the start of the new term were in Bulgaria. A small dinner party with everyone staying for the night was planned. Ginger, with Voldemort's help Harry'd been told, had 'arranged' everything. Harry was content to just relax and enjoy the remaining days of his respite.

He stood beside Ginger in the main vestibule waiting for their guests to arrive. He had opened the floo to the network at precisely 6:30 gmt and it would only remain open for 10 minutes.

Voldemort hadn't appeared at the manor yet. Harry and Ginger had arrived that morning. And since Voldemort wasn't allowed at the Potter residence until after Ginger gave birth (as per the contract), Harry hadn't seen him since the morning after the duel. He wondered if he should call him but realized that Voldemort would get there when he was good and ready to be seen.

Ron and Hermione were the first through the floo. As they had seen each other only days before at the Bill's, the greeting was casual although Hermione was bowled over by the architecture of the old estate.

Severus arrived next, accompanied by Nagini who instantly went in search of rodents, with a reminder from Harry that Crookshanks was still off limits.

The Malfoys arrived separately. Lucius strode in from the library where he had been finalizing some paper work for Harry. Narcissa stepped out of the hearth, complaining about being dragged away from her manor – until she caught sight of Lucius. After a moment of shock, Narcissa was reduced to tears and hugs until she turned an impressive Malfoy scowl at Harry.

Her rage entailed reaming Harry, Lucius, Ginny and eventually Draco (who was last through the floo) about the secrecy.

Harry smirked as Draco finally swept out of the fireplace.

“Sorry I’m late,” said Draco. It seemed ‘Mr. Dress to Impress’ could also be called ‘Mr. Knows How to Make an Entrance.’ He dusted off his robes with flourish, although if there were any speck of ash on his robes, it would have taken a muggle microscope to find it. And Harry was damn sure Draco had long mastered a dust repellent spell for the Floo Network.

Draco told them that he’d been called out of town by a freelance job. He endured the scolding from his mother, defending his own part of the secret by blaming Harry, until he turned to his father.

Harry couldn’t help the feeling of envy that enveloped him as he watched Lucius embrace his son. They spoke quietly to one another and soon Narcissa stepped in to cry a bit more.

As family reunions went, Harry suspected it was joyful, judging by the smiles on their faces. Although it had been Harry’s actions that insured they *were* still a family, he couldn’t help the feelings that almost bordered on jealousy from lingering in him as he watched them.

Voldemort proved that he was still the master at dramatic flair. Whether it was some sort of instinct of Harry’s feelings or simple timing, Harry couldn’t be sure.

The words, “How charming,” sarcastically muttered as he materialized behind Harry were over-shadowed by Harry’s shout of pain as his palm hit his scar and his knees hit the floor.

"Oh dear," said Voldemort as he floated away. "Sorry about that, Harry."

Harry doubted it and dragged himself back to his feet. "I hate it when you do that," grumbled Harry.

Voldemort chuckled.

"Shall we move to the dinning room," said Ginger, in her perfect hostess voice. "I believe dinner is served."

The atmosphere around the table as they ate an extensive spread set out by the house elves was cheerful and the conversation interesting without broaching on any 'difficult' topics.

The duel was discussed and Ron was brave enough to speculate upon what Vandewater had suggested. Draco picked up on it too.

"Do you think Harry could've won if he'd had more time?" Draco asked Lucius.

Lucius was thoughtful a moment. "Well," he began. "Considering the intensity of the duel, Harry's youth and stamina may have given him the edge, but with Curio's experience, it's really very hard to judge. I believe stopping it where he did was quite acceptable."

"What if Harry *had* won?" asked Ron.

Lucius looked seriously at Harry. "Had you won," said Lucius. "You would have become the Grand Master. There can be only one."

"Does that mean Harry would have had to take on all those responsibilities?" said Hermione, glancing back and forth between Lucius and Draco.

"Oh, yes," said Lucius. "If Harry had won and refused the Grand Mastership, then a tournament of sorts would have been required to fill the position."

"Meaning?" said Harry curiously.

“You would have had to fight until someone beat you,” said Draco with a grin.

“But couldn’t Curio have kept the position?” said Harry.

“Only if he beat you in another duel,” Lucius explained.

“Well that seems sort of twisted,” said Ginger. “If you have to beat an Acknowledged Master three times to become one, how come you only have to beat the Grand Master once to become Grand Master?”

“Obviously,” said Severus with impatience. “The title explains it. There can be only one ‘best.’ Beating the ‘best,’ even once makes you the best.”

The table was silent for a moment, everyone in their own thoughts.

Glad I missed out on that one.

Why?

Harry looked up at Draco across the table. *I don’t have time to go flitting about the country supervising Acknowledged Master duels.*

But you could have quit your day job. Then you wouldn’t have to worry about the new curriculum.

Harry sent him a glare. *I was trying not to think about that. And thank you very much for bringing up such a painful subject.*

Draco grinned maddeningly. *Someone has to do it.*

Hermione, who was looking back and forth between the two must have noticed Harry’s scowl because she quickly intervened.

“So, Draco,” said Hermione. “It must be so exciting investigating all those ancient artifacts.

Narcissa jumped on the subject and started bitching. In a tone that reminded Harry distinctly of Molly Weasley, she complained, “It’s disgusting. All that grime.”

"Honesty, mother," said Draco despairingly. "I told you I don't actually do the digging." *Sure, it's ok for me to risk my life as a Death Eater but heaven forbid I get dirty.*

Harry choked on his sip of wine and Ron instantly started pounding his back.

"I'm ok," said Harry. "Just went down the wrong way." He met Draco's gaze. *You trying to kill me?*

Draco shrugged with a grin. *Sorry.*

"So what did they have you chasing down this time?" said Harry.

"The amulet again," said Draco. "Had to go to South Africa this time."

"What amulet?" said Hermione.

"The Amulet of Quetzalcoatl."

"Oh, that's a fascinating object," said Hermione. "Is the Ministry still looking for it?"

"Incessantly," grumbled Draco.

"They'll never find it," said Lucius

"Why not?" said Ron.

"It doesn't exist."

All eyes were drawn to Lucius. "Why do you say that?" said Hermione.

"Because if it did exist," said Lucius with the distinct Malfoy drawl. "Salazar, or at the very least, *one* of the Dark Lords would have *acquired* it."

"I'm inclined to agree," said Severus, a bit sardonically.

Voldemort chuckled. "Indeed."

"I suppose," said Hermione with a resigned sigh. "But you can't discount the documentation of it's sightings."

That was Hermione. Always thinking of the facts.

"*Alleged* sightings."

That was Draco always pointing out the flaw in the facts. Hermione glared at him then turned back to Harry. "Speaking of Salazar and *alleged* sightings," said Hermione. "Professor Lupin said he noticed the medallion you wear around your neck and asked me if I had seen it."

"And?" prompted Harry warily.

"And I assume it's the one Voldemort gave you," said Hermione glancing toward the fire where Voldemort sat in a large comfy chair. Harry nodded. "He mentioned it was obviously old and had foreign markings. I didn't think anything of it because you've been wearing it for years."

"And," Harry prompted again.

Hermione grinned. "Then I had a class full of excited students talking about Salazar's Talisman."

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, sort of surprised me too," said Harry. "Although it shouldn't have."

In a manner similar to what Draco had done in Harry's, Ron startled and yanked the chain around Harry's neck to look at the medallion.

"This is Salazar's Talisman?" said Ron with awe. "And you didn't show Bill the other day."

Harry carefully extracted the talisman from Ron's hand and dropped it back under his shirt. "No, I didn't because I didn't want a lecture," said Harry who then looked up at Hermione. "And I don't need one from you either. I already got the low down on the medallion from my students."

“Ah yes,” Voldemort spoke up. “Miss Larsen.”

Hermione grinned with pride. “Yes, she is something isn’t she?” said Hermione. “Remus mentioned that the inscription was in parseltongue. He seemed disturbed by it but I couldn’t find anything wrong with it.”

Harry blinked. “How do you know what it says?”

“Cindy told me of course,” said Hermione. “You showed it to the class.”

“Oh yeah,” said Harry. “I forgot she could read it.”

“Wait a minute,” said Severus. “Miss Larsen *read* it?”

Harry couldn’t help his grin. “Er, yeah. Cindy’s a parselmouth.”

Harry shared a laugh with Hermione as the Slytherins around the table complained about the latest Gryffindor parselmouth.

Ron turned to Harry. “So what’s it say?”

“If truth is timeless. Death is a deception,” Harry told him.

Draco’s attention rifled back to Harry. “What?”

“The medallion,” said Harry. “That’s what the inscription says.”

“If truth is timeless, death is a deception,” Draco echoed with a thoughtful look on his face.

“Profound, isn’t it,” said Hermione.

Draco blinked at her. “Yeah,” said Draco, still frowning. “Profoundly familiar.”

The rest of the week went too fast as far as Harry was concerned. Draco and Narcissa remained at the estate for an extended visit with Lucius. While Ginger soon began to complain about the intrusion (as soon as Narcissa discovered Ginger’s ‘condition’ and the implications of her bearing twins, she latched onto Ging with the enthusiasm of

any over-protective mother), Harry enjoyed the time fencing with the Malfoys.

It reminded him specifically of another Christmas – one spent with Death Eaters. And while Harry was loath to admit it, he was just as comfortable as he had been back then.

It also reminded him that these were some of his private memories that would soon become public knowledge. He hoped he had the some Gryffindor courage left to endure it.

Harry sat in his chair off to the side (the same as he had while the students did their curse presentations) while Voldemort floated in front of the class. The sixth year Gryffindors appeared both appalled and enthralled that the first class of the 'new curriculum' was going to be led by Voldemort.

"Harry has promised not to interrupt me," Voldemort told the class. "As I have promised him as well. At times we will be explaining things together."

The class sat enrapt almost forgetting to take notes as Voldemort explained a little about his up-bringing in a muggle orphanage, how he considered Hogwarts his true home, and he paralleled the circumstances to Harry's life after Voldemort had killed his parents.

He expounded in great detail of his elaborate plot to collect Harry's blood after the Triwizard Tournament. Harry couldn't help smirking as Voldemort gloated about how brilliant the plan really was. But Voldemort did make a point of mentioning that he didn't know at the time that Harry had saved Wormtail's life.

Voldemort spoke with seriousness and gravity through the whole lecture, which Harry appreciated.

"It was after we had set up our new hidden camp that genius struck," said Voldemort. "My Death Eaters were all lamenting on Harry's luck in escaping me again." He paused to send Harry a glance. "I admit I was quite livid and I was brooding as I listened to them."

"But I kept hearing the word connected."

“The wands connected,” said Sean.

“Yes,” said Voldemort.

“And you had Professor Potter’s blood,” said Missy.

“Indeed,” said Voldemort. “But as you will hear, there was so much more. Much of it I – we” he amended with another glance at Harry, “would not learn of or come to experience until later. All I began to focus on was the fact that I could not kill Harry Potter. Therefore, I had to convince him to join me. Then I recalled the prophesy.”

“The prophesy?” said Cindy.

Voldemort looked at Harry and lifted an eyebrow. Harry sighed.

“This particular prophesy involves ‘the heirs uniting,’” said Harry. “We’ll go further into the details later.”

Voldemort chuckled.

“Uniting?” said Cindy. “So you figured that since Professor Potter is the heir of Gryffindor and you’re – er, were – the heir of Slytherin, that you could come to more power if you were united.”

“Oh yes,” said Voldemort. “I was convinced – and of course, I was right-“

“Voldemort,” said Harry.

“But I’m jumping ahead,” Voldemort went on with a knowing smirk. “But now you have the problem. How does one convince a 15 year old boy, orphaned by your own hand to join you?”

“You wanted to turn him?” Missy wanted to know, looking puzzled.

“Oh no, my dear,” said Voldemort. “Harry could not be turned. He is inherently good. I needed him that way for the Balance of Power.” Voldemort raised a hand to keep the class from questioning about that. “Later,” said Voldemort.

“Ok,” said Sean. “But what could you do to get him to join you?”

“What indeed,” said Voldemort. “Just offer him what he’d never had. What he’d always wanted.”

Voldemort studied the class as they mulled over the facts. He was making them think. Harry had to admire that. He’d done the same thing with Harry many times.

Cindy laughed suddenly. “No way,” said Cindy.

Voldemort looked at her pointedly and her expression changed to dawning.

“Yes, Miss Larsen,” said Voldemort. “I had to force Harry to see me as a father.”

The class laughed and Voldemort simply let them. He turned to look at Harry but Harry dropped his gaze.

“But to do that,” Voldemort went on once they had settled, “I had to spend time with him. I had to find ways to make him come to me and entice him to stay with me so I could get to know him and so he could get to know me.”

“Threat of torture,” said Sean softly, remembering one of Harry’s earlier lessons. “For those he cared about.”

“Yes,” said Voldemort. “I started manipulating Harry’s emotions when he turned 15. The day after his birthday as I recall. But the planning for that fateful meeting, the first time that Harry came to me of his own free will, started well before that.

“I had to get him out of his relative’s house. I could not touch him there.”

“What did you do?”

“My first gift to Harry,” said Voldemort almost smugly. “His godfather.”

“Sirius? What-”

Voldemort held up his hand to silence Harry. "I have your word, Harry."

"Sorry," muttered Harry.

"I used my faithful rodent," said Voldemort. "I sent him out to brag. Once it was public that Wormtail, and not Sirius Black, betrayed the Potters and murdered all those people that day, I knew Sirius would be freed.

"And I knew Sirius would get Harry," Voldemort went on. "Sirius was too loyal to the Potters to leave Harry in his Muggle relative's hands alone and miserable. Once he was moved, I snatched his owl."

"How did you do that?"

"I tempted her with a rat. Wormtail *did* have his uses," said Voldemort. "Then I put her under the Imperius Curse. After that, I knew I could get Harry to come to me."

"How?"

"Threat of torture?" said Sean.

"Sort of." Voldemort turned to Cindy. "The first note I sent Harry is on his desk. Read it aloud, Miss Larsen."

Cindy moved to Harry's desk and picked up the old piece of parchment. She glanced hesitantly at Harry and he nodded to her.

She read:

I know where you are, Harry. Who will it take to bring you to me? Perhaps your precious Sirius Black or maybe Mr. Ron Weasley? Miss Granger might suit my purpose too. Who will it be, Harry?

"What did Professor Potter do?" said Missy.

"Think very hard," Voldemort told the class. "Harry finally had what he could only dream of: a home with his godfather, where he would be loved and spoiled by 2 particularly devoted house-elves, living next

door to his best friend and his family, able to play quidditch everyday if he wanted. What *should* he have done?" quizzed Voldemort.

"He should have gone to Sirius with the note," said Sean.

Cindy sighed. "But Professor Potter wasn't used to having people to turn to."

"Very good, Miss Larsen," said Voldemort.

"He could have gone to Mr. Weasley – er, Ron," said Sean. "He usually counted on him."

"Yes," said Missy. "But after reading that note, he probably would have thought it was too dangerous to be his friend."

Harry snorted. "It was too dangerous to be my friend." Harry couldn't help it.

Voldemort chuckled. "Go on, Miss Cooper."

"I bet he ran away," said Missy, looking anywhere but at Harry.

"Yes, and when Harry noticed that Hedwig was waiting for a reply," Voldemort paused and gestured at the desk.

Harry magicked the rest of the letters onto the desk and Cindy picked up the next one. Cindy read them in order until she reached Voldemort's last letter.

Come now, Harry. I told you that I don't want you dead. I merely want to talk to you. You will be quite safe. Your last note was amusing but I am very sure that we do indeed have a lot to say to each other. For example, has anyone told you why I have wanted to kill you all these years? Would you like to know why now I don't? I could apparate anytime I wanted to into Hogwarts and take one of your friends with very little effort. You could too. Would you like to know why? I will explain it all to you, my boy.

Hedwig is under the Imperius Curse. You have a very loyal and intelligent owl but I had to insure that I was the only one who could correspond with you.

“That is the one that got to Harry,” said Voldemort.

“Why?” said Sean. “Threatening to steal his friends?”

“That and more, Mr. McIves,” said Voldemort. “I was relying on the hope that Harry didn’t know my capabilities. And I wanted to know how much he knew.

“When I got his reply, I knew that he knew absolutely nothing. That his so called friends and family had told him very little. And *that* is what I used.”

“What?” said Missy. “Used what?”

“Harry picked this class to force me to show myself.”

“Curiosity,” said Cindy. “Information.”

“Indeed,” said Voldemort. “Harry had so little knowledge of the Wizarding World that he was practically starving for knowledge, especially about his own life.

“So even at 15, armed only with his wand, his broom and his cloak, he came to me,” said Voldemort. “He used his cloak and his broom and followed Hedwig who carried his reply to my note.

“Four times he faced me and every time I tried to kill him, but he came anyway. I admit I was surprised how readily he came and how bravely he faced me yet again. For all he knew I could have struck him down right there and then. But I saw no fear. The whole of the wizarding world, the Minister of Magic himself was afraid to even say my name, but this 15 year old boy came before me and boldly said, ‘I’m here, Voldemort. What do you want?’

“The only hesitance I noticed was when I approached him. I didn’t know at the time that my presence hurt him, and we both found out rather quickly that my actual touch became more painful every time.”

“Why?” said Cindy.

“You see, because of the connections between us, when ever I touched him, magic was transferred between us.”

“You fed magic off each other?” said Sean aghast.

“Yes. Harry, being young, absorbed more from me and the transition used to weaken him. But we digress,” said Voldemort. “The gradually increasing amount of pain he endured from my touch – not to mention when I touch his scar – is why Harry is capable of countering the Cruciatus Curse.

“Anyway, it was that initial drain of strength which – persuaded – Harry to stay with me that first time. After that, it became very convenient that I could *persuade* Harry to stay with me by just touching him for a brief period of time.”

Harry could easily recall all the occasions Voldemort drained him to make him stay with him. But something about their connection and the transferences of power stuck in his head. Could it still work? In reverse? Harry wondered.

“Professor Potter has a temper?” Cindy was asking.

Apparently Voldemort had begun telling the class what he had taught Harry.

“I dare say, he’s learned to control it,” said Voldemort. “Especially with me. Whenever he lost it, I punished him.”

“You would torture him?” said Sean softly.

“Indeed,” said Voldemort. He sent Harry a glance. “I always wondered...”

“Wondered what?” Dawn asked.

“Why Harry never asked me why I punished him so severely when he lost his temper.”

"I always assumed it was because whenever I lost it," said Harry. "I never had anything nice to say about you."

Voldemort chuckled and turned to face him. "There is that. But you lost it many times with others and I punished you just as severely."

Harry sat up with interest. "Alright, Voldemort, I'll bite. Why?"

"What happened when you lost your temper with your Aunt Marge?"

"How do you know about that?" said Harry.

"Harry, how could I achieve my goal if I didn't know what you'd been through?"

"But--"

"Just answer the question, Harry."

"I blew her up," said Harry.

The class reacted with surprise. Harry looked to them and grinned.

"Not blew up like explode, blew her up like a balloon."

"Yes," said Voldemort.

"She deserved it," said Harry plainly.

Voldemort chuckled again. "Maybe, but then you ran away, putting the Ministry into an uproar because 13 year old Harry Potter was missing with Sirius Black at large."

Harry couldn't help smiling at the memory. "If Sirius had really wanted to kill me, he could've done it easily in the alley before the Knight Bus came."

"Yes," said Voldemort. "And you thought you were going to be arrested didn't you?"

"What does this have to do with Professor Potter losing his temper?" said Cindy.

“What indeed,” said Voldemort, his expression intense as he stared at Harry.

“I didn’t mean to do it,” said Harry, staring back.

Voldemort nodded and turned back to the class. “Harry understands. Do you?”

The students appeared to be thinking until Cindy’s hand shot up.

“Go ahead, Cindy,” said Harry.

“He – you lost control of your magic,” said Cindy.

“Yes, Miss Larsen,” said Voldemort. “It is very dangerous, especially for a powerful witch or wizard to lose control of their magic. Harry sometimes did rash things when he lost his temper. I knew he’d be very powerful one day and knew I had to teach him to control it.”

“Threat of torture?” said Sean.

“For Harry,” said Voldemort. “The ultimate torture. But he did indeed learn to control his temper.”

As true as it was, Harry couldn’t help but taunt. “Didn’t stop me from provoking you though,” said Harry.

“No,” said Voldemort. “Or arguing with me.”

“Far be it for me to deprive such an exalted presence from the mental stimulation,” said Harry lifting his brows.

Voldemort chuckled and the bell rang.

As the class prepared to leave, Voldemort drifted over to Harry. He reached a hand out toward Harry’s face, not quite touching him.

“That wasn’t so bad,” said Voldemort. “Was it, my son?”

Harry stared at him. “It’s only the beginning.”

“Professor,” said Cindy, startling Harry.

“She can’t see or hear me, Harry,” said Voldemort. “You’re second years are coming in.”

Harry nodded and turned to the girl. “What is it, Cindy?” said Harry.

“Did Voldemort really try to make you see him as a father?”

Harry glanced at Voldemort then looked down at Cindy’s curious expression. The truth would be coming out anyway.

“He did,” said Harry. “And I will tell you all – am now obligated to tell you all – how he succeeded.”

“But-“

“It’s a very long, complicated story, Cindy,” said Harry with a sigh. “And you will hear it. In the end, I did what I had to do.”

Subdued by Harry’s seriousness, Cindy nodded. “You shouldn’t have to tell us,” she said softly. “Just doesn’t seem fair.”

Harry had to smile. “Miss Larsen,” said Harry. “Are you sure you aren’t related to Professor Weasley?”

Chapter 13

The Experiment

The 'new' curriculum was going as well as could be expected. Once the students, 6th and 7th years who were the ones being taught, got their minds around the fact that Harry was, in fact, only their age when everything was happening to him, their manner had changed somewhat.

Many were horrified that someone their age should be subjected to such ruthless manipulation, others were awed that Harry had come through it at all. His Gryffindors came to appreciate his cynicism and warped sense of humor for what it was - reluctant acceptance of 'his lot in life.'

Harry found himself distancing himself from the students, everyone actually, during the day and became aloof and withdrawn most of the time. The students gave him a respectable berth.

Voldemort was in his element. At times he successfully managed to make Harry feel 16 years old again. He gloated over his sinister exploitation with the all-knowing perception he always had. It had been perhaps his most vulnerable year - his 6th - when he felt the most helpless, when he felt he could never win. It was the year Voldemort started getting to Harry. But it was also the year Harry started getting to Voldemort as well. And it was when Voldemort started giving Harry 'gifts.'

Draco was the one who finally snapped Harry back out of his withdrawal by reminding him.

But, Harry, you beat him.

Draco-

No, you won, remember. You made him care.

We haven't gotten to that part yet.

I know, but a little reminder to HIM and to the students that you're here now and he's dead isn't against the rules.

I know but-

He can't control you anymore, Harry, Draco reminded. All he has is memories, his and yours.

They still hurt.

I know, but he's still just a ghost. YOUR ghost as a matter of fact. Draco was silent for a minute. You know Harry, there must be something to THAT. I'll talk to Granger.

What are you talking about?

Well if he's your personal poltergeist then there HAS to be some sort of control to it. I mean a part from the contract.

Yes, but it probably goes both ways, Harry had to argue. It always went that way. The damn Slytherin Connection.

Maybe. But...

Draco trailed his thought off but Harry understood. It was that concept that got Harry thinking again. He'd have to test his theory and he knew exactly how and for whom to try it.

Harry watched his most irritating class enter the room and settle into their seats. They weren't disrespectful or nasty but Harry didn't think they believed half of the things he told them. Although they did seem to latch onto the idea that 'famous Harry Potter' had been duped and manipulated by the heir of Slytherin and rather extol the idea a bit more than necessary.

Harry was getting a little tired of their skepticism and their total lack of curiosity. He knew the latter bugged Voldemort as well, which is why Voldemort rarely came into the class, despite the fact that they were Slytherins.

He wanted to snap them out of their blasé attitudes and get their minds moving. And he intended to stretch his 'free-hand' with the curriculum to do it. If his theory worked, he wanted it to be in front of this class.

Harry let them wait a few minutes as he pretended to look over his notes. Then he casually stood up, rounded his desk and leaned against it. Knowing he had their attention, he brought a hand to his scar and called Voldemort.

"Oh, Harry," Voldemort complained right away from his chair in the back, although he had not materialized. "You know I find this class tedious."

"I know, Voldemort," said Harry not moving his gaze from the class. "But we're going to fix them today."

"Fix them?" Voldemort chuckled. "Oh, I do like the sound of that. How pray tell?"

Still scrutinizing the class, Harry replied, "I have a couple of things planned to see if we can *adjust* their attitudes and get them motivated."

Several students snorted. The Dark Four, as Harry referred to them.

"Really?" said Voldemort as he appeared in his chair. Many students glanced his way, looking unimpressed. "What kind of *things*?"

"I don't believe they understand the magnitude of your effect on the wizarding world," said Harry. "They can't conceive the horror or the fear you inspired because they have only heard tell of it and now only see you as a harmless ghost."

Voldemort smirked. "Hardly harmless."

Harry crossed his arms. "Indeed."

"Harry," said Voldemort as he rose from the chair. "Are you saying you intend for me to touch you in the presence of this class?"

Several students perked up. It was known to the school that Voldemort could still torture Harry but only the 6th year Gryffindors had witnessed it. Harry figured this particular class didn't believe *that* either, as loath as they were to trust the word of any Gryffindor.

Harry repressed a grin. "In a manner of speaking," said Harry. "But first," he went on to the class. "Did any of you know that I am part Slytherin?"

A quiet murmur of disbelief featuring the words "rumor" and "circumstantial" floated around the room.

"You doubt it?" said Voldemort with disappointment. "Harry possesses many of the characteristics Salazar Slytherin himself desired in all the student of his house."

"The sorting hat wanted to put me in Slytherin," said Harry. "It saw those characteristics and knew I could talk to talk to snakes."

"But you can't," said Cassiopeia Abbott quite convinced. "Not really."

"That's a rumor," agreed Dante Manelin, ring-leader of The Four.

"Just like that Larsen girl," Cassiopeia added. "She claims to be a Parselmouth but no one has ever heard her talk to a snake."

Harry sighed. "Miss Larsen aside," said Harry. "Who I can vouch for-"

"You've heard her speak-"

"No," said Harry interrupting Miss Abbott with a scowl worthy of Snape. "But she understands me when I speak to my snakes."

"*Your* snakes?" said Dante doubtfully.

"Indeed," muttered Voldemort, who appeared entirely too amused by the conversation to Harry. Then to the classes fascination he called Nagini, who had taken residence in Harry's office.

The class looked back and forth between Voldemort and the large snake as they spoke. Harry almost laughed as the conversation was

nonsensical drivel but the class seemed engrossed by the scene so Harry remained quiet.

Then he straightened and moved away from his desk. *"Nagini,"* Harry said to the snake. She turned her head to him. *"Would you like to eat me now?"*

Voldemort chuckled. The snake slithered toward him and wrapped her body around him, coiling up until her upper-most portion wrapped around his raised arm. She looked him directly in the eye.

"You have made me a fine nest, Master Harry," said Nagini. *"I would not eat you."*

"I know, Nagini," said Harry. *"You have done well. You may go now."*

Nagini bowed her head and uncoiled herself from around Harry. As she slithered back to Harry office, the class stared at him.

"Nagini is - er - was - Voldemort's snake," Harry told them. "But she obeys me now."

"But you are the heir of Gryffindor. Why would a snake obey you?" Cassiopeia demanded imperiously.

"Because I am also the heir of Slytherin," said Harry plainly.

"No way," said Daray Messina.

"You may be able to convince the Gryffindors of that," said Adair Darcy. "But we-"

Voldemort's chuckle cut him off. "But he is. I made him my heir."

"Why?" demanded Dante.

"Because he is worthy," said Voldemort simply.

Harry could see the class become more interested and he summoned his sword, which he had smuggled out of the fencing room.

"The Slytherin fortune was only one of Lord Voldemort's many gifts," said Harry. He pulled his medallion out from under his shirt and showed the class. "This is another," he said. "This is Salazar's Talisman."

The disclosure was met with a number of gasps, but none of them disbelief.

"This," Harry un-sheathed Sennie and waved it, "is another gift. You've all seen me fence now." He eyed the class, daring them to deny it.

"You beat a Malfoy," grumbled Adair.

"Ah, but only because I was taught by a Malfoy," said Harry.

The class perked up again and several looked at one another.

"Not Lucius Malfoy?" said Cassi.

"Of course," said Harry. "Who else would train Lord Voldemort's favorite pet?"

"Harry-"

"Work with me, Voldemort," murmured Harry. Voldemort chuckled.

"Indeed," said Voldemort. "All Harry needed to do was ask. And of course Lucius was a faithful servant."

Harry re-sheathed the sword and held it out by the blade, showing it to a number of students.

"That looks like a Slytherin sword," said Varian Vance.

"I've seen that sword," said Royce Serle "In fencing class. It's supposed to be entrapped."

Harry turned to him and held the hilt out to the boy. Excited, the boy took it. The webbing around the grip closed around his hand until he let go. Since Harry was still gripping the sheath, it didn't fall. He then held it out for several others to try.

Harry tried to suppress his smug relief that the class was now completely fascinated with everything he showed them. They didn't rely on blind faith, as his other students though, but when presented with evidence, all reluctance had dropped from their doubting little minds.

To awe them just a bit more, Harry took the hilt in his own hand and released Sennie. The delighted gasps and 'wows' from the class when Sennie erupted from the sword bolting up and down Harry's arm rewarded him further.

Encouraged, Harry magicked a rack on the wall for his sword, hung it up and dismissed Sennie to his rooms.

Turning back to the class, Harry quizzed, "Who is the most powerful witch or wizard you know?"

The students answered as expected: parents, some claimed Lucius Malfoy, other reluctantly named Albus Dumbledore.

A snort came from the door and Harry looked over.

"Come in Professor Snape," said Harry.

"Professor Snape is a very power wizard," said Adair.

Snape snorted again.

"Indeed he is," Harry agreed but the students were more interested in hearing from the head of their house.

"So who is the most powerful witch or wizard you know, Professor?" said Dante with a challenging grin.

Severus hesitated, folding his robes across his chest as he crossed his arms. "Living or dead?" said Severus.

Voldemort chuckled. "Always the diplomat, Severus," said Voldemort. "Living," he specified.

"Potter of course."

The class erupted in denial and some even sounded outraged, betrayed.

"Time to grow up, children," said Severus, moving toward the front of the room. "Albus was the most powerful for a very long time," he paused to look at Voldemort, "You know its true. Then once Lord Voldemort returned to his body and started absorbing power from Mr. Potter, he became the most powerful until Harry learned to control his magic and their powers equaled out.

"Now Harry Potter *is* the most magically powerful wizard in the world as well as the most influential."

The students were silent through Severus' declaration.

"And I believe he is about to probe it," he added.

The students were instantly interested again. So did Voldemort.

Severus looked at Voldemort then at Harry. "Your theory is sound, Potter," said Snape. "But I'm not sure you should reveal it to him."

"This class needs a reality check," said Harry. "I will deal with the rest."

"You always do," said Severus with a sigh. "Very well. I'm here."

"Harry, my boy, you have me rapt now," said Voldemort.

"I'm sure," said Harry. To the class, he said, "This next demonstration is more of an experiment. It's a test of my powers. I'm hoping to show you all exactly what I - and Voldemort - can do."

"Really?" said Voldemort with unmistakable interest.

"Yes," said Harry. "Everyone stand up." The class did and Harry cleared the room with a wave of his hand. "Now. I am going to give Voldemort the power to use his wand."

Several students choked as Harry pulled a wand from his robes. Voldemort drifted closer, focused curiosity on his expression.

"And how do you intend to do that?" said Voldemort.

Harry looked at him. "Our connection, of course." Voldemort's eye brows shot up. "So be nice," added Harry as he held the wand out. Voldemort drifted closer and stared hard into Harry's face.

Harry grinned. "Aren't you curious?"

Closing his eyes, Harry concentrated on his internal magic. The memory of burning at the stake.

"Just one hand," said Harry.

Voldemort's hand gripped around his fist and Harry was able to block out the pain. He relaxed and felt the charge flow through him. "*Apporton*," said Harry and just like when he was 17 he felt the magic float around him, through him, over him.

Voldemort laughed with delight. "Harry, you are indeed brilliant."

Voldemort started moving Harry's hand, throwing mild spells around the room. The students eagerly egged him on, wanting to see, and he began to cast stronger hexes.

"Show them, my lord," said Severus.

"*Crucio*."

Harry heard Severus scream and heard the children gasping.

"Oh this pleases me," said Voldemort. "Indeed it does." Harry's arm moved again and Voldemort must have touched the tip of the wand to his head because pain exploded in Harry's scar.

Harry hit his knees. Voldemort didn't let go of his hand. Harry looked up into Voldemort's gaze. Voldemort looked as pleased as ever. Still gripping Harry's hand, he moved the other toward Harry face.

"To feel this power again," said Voldemort, staring deeply into Harry's eyes. He waved the wand again and the class was restrained, some of them looking shocked, some struggling within magical bonds.

Voldemort had taken over. Harry wasn't giving Voldemort the power any more, he was taking it. The pain interfered with Harry's ability to control the flow to the wand.

"Let go of him," said Severus.

Voldemort looked down at Harry again.

"Harry, my son," said Voldemort, touching Harry's cheek. "The true heirs can unite once more. You have shown me the way. As always, you've made me proud."

Voldemort's wand was starting to shake in Harry's hand. He tried to let go of it, but Voldemort's grip was firm around his own.

What have I done?

Another hand came around Harry's wrist and the connection was broken. Harry hit the floor.

"That wasn't nice, Severus," said Voldemort with amusement.

"Harry, are you all right?" said Severus, leaning over him.

"Rowan," Harry managed to call. Once he was pain free again, Harry looked over the class. They all look stupefied.

"Do you understand now?" said Harry.

Before he knew it, word had spread about the experiment. Harry's 6th year Gryffindors came into their next lesson looking miffed. The bell had barely ceased reverberating when they started in on him.

"You gave Voldemort your power," said Sean. "And you didn't show *us?!'*"

"Slytherins!" said Cindy aghast. "You showed *them!'*"

Harry really should have expected their annoyance but he couldn't show favoritism *all* the time.

"So why not show this class as well, Harry," said Voldemort, settling into his chair. "We can show them all."

"I don't think so," said Harry hopping onto his desk.

"Why?" said Voldemort.

"Yes. Why not?" said Missy.

"See, the class want to-"

"Voldemort," Harry cut him off.

"You have Rowan, Harry," Voldemort went on.

"And we are your favorite class," said Sean. "Voldemort always says so."

Voldemort chuckled. "Yes. Do reconsider."

Harry crossed his arms. "I won't," said Harry. "And you know why."

Voldemort couldn't hide his amusement. "A tad worried are we?"

"Worried?" said Rufus, looking around.

"I won't have you running amok with a wand," said Harry.

"Amok?" said Cindy.

Voldemort drifted over to him, outside the Flinch Zone. "You don't need a wand," said Voldemort. He looked down at Harry's hands crossed over his chest. "I wonder..."

"I don't think so, Voldemort," said Harry. "Besides, I have to give it to you first."

The class was riveted which Harry suspected Voldemort intended.

"So what happened?" said Cindy.

"Something that won't happen again."

Voldemort chuckled. "Oh, Harry. Don't be a spoil sport."

"Tell us what happened, Professor," Sean begged.

"Yes."

"Please, Professor."

When Harry only stared at them, Voldemort muttered, "Stubborn."

"Lord Voldemort will tell us," said Cindy.

"We know he won't lie or omit little facts," said Sean.

Voldemort laughed. Harry made a frustrated gesture and jumped off his desk.

"Harry showed just how much power he has," said Voldemort as Harry moved around his desk and sat down. "He used internal magic to block the pain from my touch and sent magic to my wand which was in his hand. Because I can still touch him, I took his hand and-"

"You could use the wand?" said Cindy.

"Yes," said Voldemort. "But as I know that Harry's internal magic can not block the pain from me touching him with 2 hands..."

"You did."

"Oh, yes," said Voldemort. "I had to see what would happen."

"And."

"Due to the pain, Harry lost control of the power he was feeding me and I was able to take it."

"So you took over his power?" said Missy stunned.

"Yes. If Severus hadn't touched Harry, breaking the single connection between us," he paused to chuckle, "I could have indeed run amok."

"Well then, I don't blame him for not wanting to go there again," said Cindy.

"Thank you, Cindy," said Harry.

"Miss Larsen, I'm hurt," said Voldemort. "Harry gave me a taste of the power I once had. Don't you think it's cruel-"

"You taught him well," half the class shot back and Harry laughed, so hard he had to hold onto the desk.

Voldemort smirked at the class. "Very amusing."

"But very accurate," said Harry, standing up again. "Now that we have covered the experiment, we can move on."

Voldemort glanced at the class. "I am most annoyed," he said, then he looked at Harry with an expression Harry hadn't seen in a while, "with all of you."

Voldemort vanished.

"Too bad," said Harry.

Chapter 14

Repercussions and Punishments

Voldemort was noticeably absent the next few days but not quiet. He conveyed his displeasure to Harry very effectively by manipulating the 5th year Slytherins into pestering Harry to show them 'the experiment.' The second years were next.

Harry couldn't complain either because outside the classroom, Voldemort could 'harass' anyone he chose without restriction from the contract.

"He's sulking," said Sean. "Enjoy it while you can."

Harry eyed his 6th years. "He's not harassing any of you, is he?"

"No," said Missy. "But I heard he's spending a lot of time with the Slytherins."

Damn if that didn't bother Harry. Harry had always been Voldemort's 'favorite pet.'

I don't miss the pain but the conversation is always a challenge.

Harry pushed the thought away. When Voldemort got bored, he'd be back to 'play.'

After another week, Harry began to worry. He thought about calling Voldemort to see what was wrong. Had Harry really been cruel to do that to him?

Harry didn't think he'd ever done an actual cruel thing in his life. Killing Wormtail and Voldemort didn't count because they had deserved it and the wizarding world had even honored him for it.

But to let Voldemort feel the power he'd lost 8 years ago... It had to... Voldemort had said how much it pleased him. How would Harry feel to have to exist without magic now?

None of the other ghosts seemed to mind though. Then again, this was Voldemort and the other ghosts have no chance of feeling magic again. But Harry had shown Voldemort that it *could* be done - for him anyway.

How bad could it be? If Harry made sure there was someone there to break the connection then it could be perfectly safe. He'd just have to stay one step ahead of Voldemort.

That was the trick though. Of course, Harry did learn from the best.

On a whim, he lifted his wrist. "Commentary."

Mr. Wormtail thinks that the experiment is a fine example of Master Harry's power and should be flaunted.

Harry smirked. Petigrew's attitude has certainly never changed.

Mr. Mooney thinks it's a very bad idea and still urges Harry to speak to Hermione about his medallion.

Harry sighed. Nor did Remus'.

Mr. Prongs thinks that it's a fascinating ability if one can learn to control it.

Harry blinked. That was an interesting opinion.

Mr. Padfoot thinks Harry's being manipulated again.

Harry frowned. He hadn't thought of that. Very bloody likely.

After 3 more days, Harry finally called Voldemort during his 6th year class. Nagini slithered in.

"The master doesn't have to come when you call, Master Harry," said Nagini. "It isn't in the contract."

"Really," said Harry because he could the burn feel on his scar. "Then why is he here? He can rarely sneak up on me, Nagini. He knows that."

Harry heard Voldemort sigh and saw him materialize in his chair. "What do you want, Harry?" said Voldemort, sounding bored. Harry could also tell that the class couldn't see or hear him.

Harry addressed Nagini. *"Tell him I miss the repartee."*

"Too bad," said Voldemort.

"But I have a surprise for you, Voldemort," said Harry.

"I'm not in the mood."

"He's here then?" said Missy.

"Yes," said Harry. "He's brooding."

"I'm told even evil dark lords may brood if they so desire."

Harry laughed and the class looked disappointed.

"Come on, Lord Voldemort," said Cindy. "We miss the amusing repartee too."

Voldemort sent her a scowl. "Ah, yes, the latest Gryffindor Parselmouth," said Voldemort. "But you've already told me, Harry, so if that's the surprise-

"It's not," said Harry.

"Well, by all means, get on with it, my boy," said Voldemort. "So I may leave your exalted presence."

Harry started to laugh but stopped. He looked closely at Voldemort's expression.

"You do *have* to come when I call you, don't you?" said Harry.

"Apparently," said Voldemort with annoyance.

"And you can't leave until I say so?"

"Apparently," Voldemort echoed.

Harry did laugh then. "Oh, I do like that," said Harry. "A bit of role reversal. Is that why you're sulking? Because I have more control now than you do?"

Voldemort's expression turned menacing. "Is that what you think, Harry?" he said in a dangerous tone. He rose from the chair.

"That would be cruel of me, don't you think?" said Harry.

Voldemort fully materialized. "You're pushing it, Harry," warned Voldemort.

Harry merely grinned. "Am I?"

"Professor?" said Sean.

Harry held up a hand as Voldemort continued to move toward him. "It's all right, he won't."

"Won't I?" said Voldemort, now at the flinch point.

"Not yet you won't," said Harry, reaching into his robe. He pulled out Voldemort's wand and rubbed it between his palms.

Voldemort stopped. Harry turned back to the snake.

"Your master knows I am not a cruel person," said Harry.

Voldemort caught on and laughed with delight.

Harry stood up, looking at Voldemort with all seriousness. "I don't appreciate your old forms of manipulation."

Voldemort smiled. "Ah, Harry, you know me well," said Voldemort. "But we are teaching the class, aren't we?"

Harry smirked. Leave it to Voldemort to accredit getting exactly what he wanted by 'teaching.'

"I get it," said Cindy of the manipulation. "The neglect scenario. He was ignoring *you*."

"Very good, Miss Larsen," said Voldemort. "You see, once Harry knew he had my attention, my favor, he found it very hard to do without it."

"I wouldn't go as far as to say that," said Harry with a snort.

"Wouldn't you?" said Voldemort, lifting a hand to Harry's face. "I could've simply killed you."

"If I remember correctly, you tried that route a few times with little success," said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. "Indeed." Voldemort's knuckle brushed down Harry cheek. "Admit it, Harry," said Voldemort. "All my favor, my gifts, my personal attention, you needed it."

Harry swallowed, not only from the pain of Voldemort's touch but from the pain of his words. Harry *had* needed it. It's what Voldemort used against him.

"You know I did," said Harry.

Voldemort let go. "Yes, I know."

"So Lord Voldemort used this manipulation again?" said Missy looking confused.

"Yes," said Cindy. "First by calling him cruel, which would rankle any Gryffindor. Then by totally ignoring him in favor of Slytherins."

"I used that manipulation once," said Voldemort wistfully. "Harry came back to me to be tested, as was required in his contract, and another boy had impersonated him by using polyjuice."

"In the beginning, I was very glad to be ignored," said Harry. "I was already upset that Voldemort had been getting to me, so I just sat in the cell and kept quiet. It didn't take long however before I got annoyed that he couldn't tell that other person *wasn't* me. When he finally did realize it was an imposter (with my help) I was starving for the recognition again, so I accepted it blindly."

"And when was this?"

"Christmas break," said Harry. "5th year." Harry looked at Voldemort. "That one really wasn't your plan though, was it?"

"Oh no," said Voldemort. "That was completely Lucius. Crafty bastard."

"Not that they were punished for it," complained Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. "Harry, why would I punish such cunning? It got you to do exactly what I wanted you to do."

Harry nodded. "Just as this last example has."

"Indeed," said Voldemort.

"I will concede, Voldemort," said Harry. "But there will be rules and you will shake on them or it won't happen again."

The class looked alarmed.

"Professor, you aren't going to-"

"I am," said Harry.

"But-"

"It will be alright, Sean," said Harry.

"But-"

"Shush, Sean," said Cindy. "Don't you want to see it?"

"Thank you, Miss Larsen," said Voldemort.

Cindy ignored him. "Besides, Professor Potter said there would be rules. I'm guessing Lord Voldemort will agree to anything to feel his power again."

Harry chuckled as Voldemort turned an irritated look to her. "Be nice, Cindy," said Harry.

"Sorry, sir."

"So what are your rules, Harry?" said Voldemort.

"First," said Harry. "I will give you plenty of time to show the class so there is no need to abuse it. If you try to touch me with a second hand, Sean will be standing next to me to break the connection."

"I will?"

"Yes, Sean," said Harry. "All you have to do is touch me and it will break the connection. And anyone in this class can call Rowan," Harry added, "And she will come." He turned to Voldemort. "Behave and-"

"Harry, don't you trust me?"

"No," said Harry. "Sean."

Looking both worried and curious, Sean stood and moved to stand on Harry's left side. Harry reached out a hand. "Do you agree, Voldemort?" said Harry.

"Certainly," said Voldemort as he shook Harry's hand.

"Very well." Harry gripped Voldemort's wand and told everyone to stand up as he cleared the room. Eyes closed, he concentrated on his internal memories. It was still an awesome sensation, feeling the flow of power move through him. Unfortunately, Voldemort didn't wait before he cheated.

The moment Voldemort felt the power, he used a restraint spell and Harry heard Sean hit the floor beside him. Harry opened his eyes and saw the entire class in full body binds.

"One step ahead," said Voldemort as he wrapped his other arm around Harry's chest. The cry of pain ripped out of him. "I'm not using my hand, Harry."

Trapped between Voldemort's arm and his chest, the pain was almost unbearable. Voldemort chuckled. "Harry, my son," said Voldemort. "What should we do now?"

Harry felt the hand wrap around his left wrist and sighed. The connection was broken. Voldemort released Harry to angrily look around.

"What happened," demanded Voldemort.

Harry heard the rustle of fabric and knew it was Hermione throwing off Harry's cloak. "One step ahead, Voldemort," said Hermione. "Rowan," she called.

Voldemort looked down at Harry, shaking on the floor. "Oh very good, Harry. I *have* indeed taught you well."

Voldemort disappeared as Rowan soared in.

While Rowan cried Harry's pain away, Hermione released the class and restored the room.

"You knew he would do that?"

"Oh yes," said Harry. "I know him too bloody well."

"That really wasn't very nice of him," said Missy.

"No," agreed Sean. "You had an agreement. He could've at least shown some appreciation for your gesture of even trying it again."

"Yes, exactly," said Harry. "But don't worry. He'll pay for it."

"Will he?" said Sean. "How?"

"Yes, how?"

"You'll see," said Harry. Of course Harry wasn't even sure if it would work, but he was on a streak now and didn't want to jinx it.

He kept Rowan with him the rest of the day so Voldemort would know Harry was angry with him. When he was alone at the end of the day, Harry leaned on the front of his desk and called Voldemort.

He appeared immediately before Harry, outside the flinch zone.

"Why?" said Harry harshly before Voldemort could say anything.

"Oh my," said Voldemort. "You *do* look angry."

"I've passed angry, Voldemort," said Harry. "Tell me why."

"Because I could," said Voldemort simply. "You knew I would."

"Irrelevant," said Harry. "I had hoped you would have shown some appreciation. At least in front of the students."

Voldemort stared hard into Harry's eyes. "You don't know what it's like, Harry," said Voldemort. "Being stripped of your powers. You've personally done it to me twice."

"Yes and both times I gave them back," snapped Harry. "In the graveyard, I had no choice but today, I chose to give them to you. I let you use me, my power, which is equal to what yours were - what *ours* were."

Voldemort blinked. "Harry, are you - hurt?" said Voldemort with wonder.

Harry sighed. "I'm disappointed," said Harry. He turned away to walk around his desk. "Even the class was surprised. They didn't think it was very nice."

"So who said-"

Harry leaned over his desk and stared Voldemort down. He put all the disappointed misery he could into his expression.

"Leave me now, father," said Harry.

Voldemort looked horrified and Harry was reminded of how Voldemort had looked after he had told Lucius to lash him.

Voldemort vanished.

"Well, that's another round to me," muttered Harry.

Voldemort was particularly nasty after that although Harry didn't see or hear him. He was avoiding the 6th years around the castle as well. He didn't leave Harry alone though. Harry almost continually felt his presence.

He felt it now as he sat at his desk working on a test for his 6th and 7th years. Harry was trying to remember the questions Voldemort had put on the bizarre written test he had given Harry the beginning of Harry's 7th year.

On a whim, he pulled out Voldemort's wand and stared at it as he twirled it within his fingers.

"Did you use your wand?" whispered Harry. He didn't expect Voldemort to answer. He didn't. Harry pulled out his own wand and felt Voldemort moving closer to see what he was doing.

Harry hit the tip of Voldemort's wand with his own. "*Prior incantum*," said Harry. He kept doing it until he did indeed find the test.

Voldemort was within the flinch zone now, probably going insane with questions. Harry made a copy of the test wondering why Voldemort didn't say anything. Harry didn't acknowledge his presence even as he felt the pain increase. Voldemort was reaching a hand toward Harry's face, Harry could tell.

He wondered if Voldemort would touch him. The knock on the door prevented it.

"Come in," called Harry.

"Harry?"

Harry leapt to his feet as his godfather poked his head inside.

"Sirius?" he said suddenly alarmed. "Is Ginger ok?"

"She's fine," said Sirius as he strolled in. "She went to the Burrow for a couple of days so I decided to visit. I told her I'd tell you."

Harry sighed and hugged him. Sirius grabbed him by the shoulders, looking hard into his face. "You all right?"

"I'm fine," said Harry.

Sirius looked skeptical. "Harry-"

"Oh give it a rest," said Harry. "You're getting as bad as Remus."

Sirius ruffled his hair. "Well, Remus is concerned."

"I'm fine," said Harry, moving away. "All grown up, remember."

"Yes, but I'm still your godfather and I will bloody well still worry about you until you're 65 and I'm dead, so there."

Harry laughed betting Voldemort was simmering over that one. "Ok, ok," said Harry. "So how's Gwenn?"

"She's fine," said Sirius. "She misses you."

"Really?" said Harry with surprise.

"Yes. Must be a girl thing. They all get attached to you."

"More like a sympathy thing," muttered Harry.

"I'm not touching that one," said Sirius.

"Appreciate that."

"Speaking of girl things," said Sirius. "You *are* going to the dinner on Sunday night, right?"

"Sunday?" said Harry thoughtfully. He smacked his forehead with his palm. "Damn, I almost forgot. Thanks Sirius. Ging would kill me if I didn't go."

Sirius grinned. "Yeah, I guessed that."

The Weasley's anniversary was Sunday. Harry *had* almost forgotten. "Hey, that gives us something to do tonight," said Harry.

"Sorry, Harry," said Sirius. "We already have a gift. We have dinner plans in Hogsmeade tonight."

Harry smirked at Sirius smug grin. He shrugged it off. "OK I guess I'll see you both on Sunday then."

"I'll be around tomorrow," said Sirius. "I'm going to help out Minerva with an animagus class."

"All right," said Harry, sitting down at his desk and rifling through a drawer for some cash. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

Sirius left and Hermione rushed into the class a few minutes latter sounding breathless.

"Harry!"

Harry didn't even bother to look up.

"It's all right, Hermione," said Harry. "I almost forgot too. We can go together."

Hermione relaxed. "I hate it when you do that."

Harry laughed. "You just missed Sirius."

"Sirius was here?" said Hermione with disappointment.

"Yeah," said Harry. "He's visiting for a couple of days."

"Great," said Hermione. "By the way, what did you say to Voldemort?"

Harry looked up then. "Why?"

"Because he's acting all hot and bothered."

"I just told him to leave me," said Harry. "Haven't seen him or heard him since. I still know when he's around though."

Harry had a sneaking suspicion that Voldemort couldn't reappear to Harry again until Harry said so.

"Interesting," said Hermione. "I'll check the library."

Harry laughed. "Thanks, Hermione." Finding his sack of galleons, Harry pulled it out and dumped it onto the desk.

"Still need a gift for Sunday, don't you?" said Hermione.

"You know me," said Harry.

Hermione kissed his cheek. "I do. See you later."

As she left, Harry felt Voldemort drift closer and again he felt Voldemort's hand reach toward his face.

Knuckles brushed down the side of his face and Harry closed his eyes. He could almost hear Voldemort's words.

"Talk to me, my son."

Was Voldemort helpless until Harry addressed him or called him? Something about how Harry had reacted *must have* restricted him. But Harry had an intuitive feeling that the minute Harry addressed Voldemort, the restriction would stop.

He'd be damned if he'd give over now.

"No," said Harry, staring at his desk. "I have accepted his punishment, he will accept mine."

He strode out of the classroom. Unfortunately, Voldemort followed.

Stan and Renee, a beater from the team, met him in the hallway.

"They found one for you," said Stan, presenting Harry with a yearbook from his year.

Harry took it and smiled. "Great timing," said Harry, taking it. "Thanks."

Harry left Hogwarts grounds, clearing his mind. He forced Voldemort from his thoughts as he tried to think of gifts for Ginger's parents - his parents.

Chapter 15

Family Values

Harry entered *Grandma's Trunk* (Voldemort was still with him) and looked around. Neville was behind the register. The shop was busy so there was a line, which Harry moved around to lean on the counter.

"Have a good day, Mr. Grason," said Neville to a customer.

"See here," an angry customer had noticed Harry. "There's a line."

Harry looked over at him. "Sorry, sir," said Harry. "I'll only be a-"

"Hey, Harry," said Neville as he continued to ring up the next persons merchandise.

Suddenly Harry was the focus of everyone's attention - again.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Potter," said the now red faced man. "Go right ahead."

Harry sighed. "I'll just be a second." To Neville, he said, "I need a gift for Ginger's parents. Just point me."

Neville thought for a moment. "Look over there," said Neville with a wave of his hand. "I'll be with you in a few minutes."

Harry nodded. "Take your time," said Harry as he moved towards that end of the shop.

He tried to ignore the muttering behind him.

"Was that Harry Potter?"

"I saw the scar."

"I thought he'd be taller."

Harry bristled over that one but heard a snort of laughter from Neville as he called a sales girl over to the counter. Harry was glancing over several shelves when Neville arrived.

"Vertically challenged are we now, Harry?" said Neville.

Harry smirked. "Yeah well I still have death rays that shoot out of my eyes."

"Death rays?"

"Never mind," said Harry as he picked up a bracelet.

"Hey, that's a good idea," said Neville. "Why don't you make it a charm bracelet, with a charm for each of her children."

Harry agreed and they began to search the case for different charms. They found a fang to represent Bill, since it was his most favored earring and a dragon for Charlie. Neville looked puzzled when Harry asked him if he had a cauldron. Harry only grinned as he magically cracked the bottom of the charm.

"Percy," declared Harry and Neville smiled. "Now," said Harry. "Do you have anything resembling a toilet seat?"

Neville blinked. "A what?"

"Forget it." Harry pulled a galleon out of his pocket and transfigured it. Then he engraved *Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes* into the gold and decided that would do for the twins. "Ok, Ron," said Harry, scanning the case. He smiled somewhat evilly when he spotted the miniature wand.

Neville handed it to him and Harry magically bent it.

Neville laughed. "That's terrible."

"Too bad," muttered Harry then he grinned. "And that's for him putting the shards of my Nimbus in the case in the Common Room."

Neville had to agree. "What about Ginny?"

Harry frowned then as he looked over the charms in the case again. The book kept drawing his eye. It might please Voldemort a little more than he would have liked but it was appropriate.

He pulled it out and initialed it with the letters T.M.R.

"The diary?" said Neville.

"Hmm," said Harry reflectively, staring at the little charm. "It brought us together," he murmured thinking of more than just Ginger.

"Even then you were coming to me," Voldemort had said.

"So what about you, Hermione and Penelope?" Neville's voice brought him out of his reverie.

"What about us?" said Harry.

"Yes," said Neville. "You know Mrs. Weasley will be mad if you don't include you two."

Harry sighed. "You're right." Harry looked around. "Any suggestions?"

"Well Penelope is the heir of Ravenclaw, right?"

"Yes."

"How about a raven," said Neville.

"Perfect."

Neville added it to the bracelet. They decided on a wise looking owl for Hermione and Neville turned to Harry. "Ok, what about you?"

Harry grimaced. "What've you got?"

"A broom?" Neville suggested.

"A little vague," said Harry.

"A sword?"

"I don't think so."

"A cup?"

"NO," said Harry. "Ah, not. Please not that."

"Er."

"What?"

"It's actually a big seller," said Neville.

"What?" echoed Harry.

Neville held up a little gold lightening bolt charm.

Harry blinked at it then had to laugh. "Works for me," said Harry. "Now Mr. Weasley."

"You could get him a box of Muggle plugs and he'd be happy," said Neville.

Harry grinned. "You're right but I'd like to do a little better than that."

Neville sighed. "Ok, let's think. How about a new car," said Neville. "You did help to destroy their old one."

"They have a new car," said Harry.

"No, I mean one he can mess around with," said Neville. Harry looked up at Neville and he grinned mischievously. "He *is* the Minister of Magic now."

Harry laughed - had to. "That is bloody brilliant."

They all sat around the table at The Burrow. Harry sat between Ginger and Sirius across from Ron and Hermione, listening to the bickering around him. The conversations streamed from Ginger's eminent birth to Charlie's up-coming wedding (his fiancée wasn't able to come today) to Mr. Weasley's headaches at the Ministry.

Harry avoided adding anything to that last conversation and no one mentioned Voldemort who remained close enough to Harry to remind him of his presence but not close enough to give Harry a his own headache, so Harry felt warm and belonged. Especially when Mrs.

Weasley began her diatribe on her pet peeves: Bill's earring, the burns on Charlie's arms, the twins' joke shop.

"And Harry," said Mrs. Weasley and Harry slowly looked up from his plate. "When are you going to let me fix your hair?" Harry's hand instinctively went to his head. "I'm really very good at settling untidiness."

Harry combed his fingers through the mess that was his hair. "Aw, mum," said Harry. "Lay off my hair. It will always-"

The clatter of a dropped fork brought Harry's eyes to Mrs. Weasley. Tears welled in her eyes. Harry stared at her a second then recalled his dream. He had written to her about that dream in a letter - a letter he wrote before he went to kill Voldemort, expecting to die.

Mrs. Weasley stood up, sobbing and started out of the room.

"Wait," said Harry, getting up to follow her. "I'm sorry."

She turned to him. "Damn it, Harry," cried Molly Weasley. "Stop apologizing." She rounded the table and pulled Harry into her arms, hugging the stuffing out of him.

"Molly, what is going on?" said Arthur Weasley.

Molly moved to the sideboard, opened a drawer and pulled out an old crumpled piece of parchment. Mr. Weasley took it tentatively and read it.

"You never showed me this," said Arthur.

Molly sniffled. "I know." She was staring at Harry again. "I was too upset." She sniffled, tears streaming down her cheek.

"Oh, Molly, calm down," said Arthur.

Harry cringed as that parchment made it's way around the table.

"I'm sorry," said Harry softly which made Mrs. Weasley burst out crying again. Harry turned away and came face to face with his wife. "Ging-"

"Shh," said Ginny. "You still don't get it, but I will knock it into you if I have to."

"I don't under-"

"I know," said Ginny, resting her palm on his cheek. "It's love, you idiot."

Harry looked at Ron who simply smiled and nodded. Hermione who now held the letter and was crying too, nodded also.

"Don't worry, Harry," said Fred. "We've got something that just might kill you yet."

"Can't disappoint old Trelawney, can we?" said George.

Harry understood and simply nodded at the twins. Speech was impossible.

"I know a Hungarian Horntail that owes you one, Harry," said Charlie. "She'd love to meet you again."

The feelings that converged on Harry were alien to him. He was almost afraid to look at Sirius. But he did and he saw the same expression he'd seen many times on Sirius' face. The one which showed the feelings he had for Harry. The feelings that had brought Sirius out of hiding Harry's fourth year, the ones which sent him after Harry when Harry had run away his fifth year. The ones which made him take the Dark Mark.

Harry looked around at his family. He felt Voldemort's fingers run down the side of his face as he stood like a statue.

"You're not alone anymore."

Harry simply couldn't express his own feelings at that point. Stammering didn't work so Harry changed the subject.

"Well since this is a party," said Harry hoarsely.

Ginger tightened her grip on Harry's arm and took his lead. "Yes," said Ginger. "I suggest it's time we let mum and dad open their presents."

The group moved into the living room, leaving the dinner mess for the house elves to clean up. Sunny and Mitsy, gifts from the twins, were quite happy to become a member of the Weasley family and while they would die rather than accept wages, the twins had assured Hermione that they were contributing their wages into a new charity fund for house elves who had been 'shamed.'

Harry and Ron thought the 'orphanage' that the twins had set up for house elves 'with clothes' was hysterical but wisely kept their mirth to themselves.

Harry made himself comfortable on the floor beside Ginger's feet, resting against her legs. Ginger, now almost 5 months along, was granted one of the cushioned chairs as everyone else made their own seating arrangements around Mr. and Mrs. Weasley as they opened the mound of gifts they had received.

Presents ranging from a new Floo powder vase to theatre tickets and a new wizard radio were all ohhed and ahhed over.

Molly looked up from a small wrapped gift. "Harry, dear, you didn't have to."

"Course I did," said Harry. "Yours is outside, Mr. Weasley."

"Outside?" said Arthur, rising to look out the window.

It had taken most of Saturday for Harry to find it, but out in the yard sat an aged turquoise car very similar to the one he and Ron wrecked.

Mr. Weasley gaped, looking as if he'd just been elected Minister - again.

"Harry, you shouldn't have," said Mr. Weasley but then he sent Harry an enthusiastic grin. "But I'm glad you did."

Harry opened his mouth to retort but Mrs. Weasley had opened her box and started crying again.

Everyone was hovering over Molly.

"A broken wand, Harry?" said Ron with mock horror.

Harry grinned. "Sorry, Ron."

The twins laughed. "Where in Merlin's name did you find a toilet seat?" said Fred.

"Well, I helped a little with that one," said Harry.

"It's perfect," sniffed Mrs. Weasley as the bracelet was passed around.

"Look Perce," said George. "A leaky cauldron."

Percy looked at Harry curiously.

"You were very passionate about those thin bottomed cauldrons," said Harry in defense.

Penelope burst out laughing. "You were, love," said Penelope as she took the jewelry. "Am I on here?"

Percy grinned in embarrassment. "Yeah all right," he agreed.

"Oh, Harry, you made me a raven." Penelope looked up at him, smiling.

Harry nodded. "If you weren't the heir, Penelope," said Harry. "I would have bled to death at your wedding."

George took the bracelet and held it up by one charm. "Who's the bolt of lightning, Harry?"

"Yeah. I don't get it," said Fred.

"Boys," Mrs. Weasley chastised them, but Harry laughed.

"What am I?" said Ginny eagerly.

"You were tough," said Harry.

Ginger flipped through the charms until she came to the miniature diary. She smirked down at Harry. "Oh, very romantic, Harry," said Ginger.

"Isn't it?" said Harry. "Don't you think it's ironic that Malfoy picked you?" He reached up and pulled her head down closer to his mouth to whisper in her ear. "Besides," whispered Harry. "After that I knew you were strong enough to put up with Voldemort's crap."

Ginger laughed and ruffled Harry's hair. "Ok, ok. You win."

As the presents were finished up and Hermione and Penelope began helping Molly with the paper strewn about, Mr. Weasley came to stand over Ginny and Harry.

"Harry," said Arthur. "While the girls are clearing up, would you like to come out and see my shop."

Harry jumped to his feet. "Definitely," said Harry. He looked down at Ginger. "You don't mind, do you, Ging?"

Ginny stood up and kissed him. "No," said Ginger. "Just don't give him any ideas that mum won't like."

"I can't promise you that," said Harry. "I've had a few of my own ideas that I've been dying to bounce off your father."

"Really?" said Arthur with excitement.

"Harry Potter, you be good," said Ginger.

Mr. Weasley pulled him away from his daughter and they went out to his little makeshift shop.

"Whoa," said Harry as he stepped in.

Mr. Weasley beamed. "I knew you, being raised by Muggles, as awful as they were, would appreciate it. My boys just don't get my fascination for gadgets."

"It isn't all that uncommon, Mr. Weasley," said Harry, moving around the room and picking up odd items that Mr. Weasley had applied magic to. "Sirius has some too."

"You know, Harry," said Mr. Weasley. "You *are* my son-in-law. You can call me dad if you want to."

Harry turned to him in surprise and opened his mouth. Pain stopped him from saying anything. Voldemort ran the back of his hand down his face and kept his fingers under Harry's chin to silence him. The fingers tightened around his jaw as if to say, "*You are my son.*"

Mr. Weasley took the reaction wrong.

"Or since you call Sirius by name, Arthur will do," he offered. "Which ever you prefer."

Harry bristled over Voldemort's possessiveness. He wouldn't let him ruin this for him. Moving away from the invisible hand, he looked at Arthur across the cluttered space. "I like dad," said Harry. "I've never called anyone that."

Arthur smiled at him then frowned. "What's wrong, Harry?"

"Hm?" said Harry, tracking Voldemort's movement around himself. "What?"

"You look a little - well - pained," said Arthur. "What is it?"

Since Voldemort hadn't left the flinch zone since they had entered the shop, Harry sighed. "Just a bit of a headache," he admitted.

"A head-" Arthur cut himself off and looked around. "He's here. Isn't he?"

Harry stared at the ground and nodded. "I'm sorry," said Harry. "There was nothing I could do and I didn't want to miss your anniversary."

"It's ok, Harry," said Arthur. "Come on. We'll go back to the house. If I know Molly, I'll bet she has more food ready."

Harry followed Mr. Weasley out of the shop with a groan. "Not more food, Mr. - er - Dad," said Harry. "I'm stuffed."

Arthur ruffled Harry's hair with a laugh and walked on. Harry stopped. Voldemort was in front of him. He tried to go around but Voldemort kept moving, preventing it.

"What is it?" said Arthur.

"He won't let me pass," said Harry.

"Just walk through him," said Arthur.

"I can't," said Harry. "Not without hitting the ground in pain."

Mr. Weasley sighed and called Ginger who came out in a rush.

"Voldemort, go away," she said with annoyance. She blinked. "Why?" Then she looked suspicious at the spot in front of Harry. "I doubt that." She blinked again and turned to Harry. "Why don't you?"

"Why don't I what?" said Harry.

"Don't you hear him?" said Ginger.

"No."

Ginger turned again. "Why can't he hear you?" There was a moment of silence until Ginger's brows shot up. "Really?" she said with interest.

"What?" said Harry.

"He said that since you feel he has betrayed you, it is in your power to punish him," said Ginger. "He said you told him to leave and you won't see or hear him until you call him or address him directly."

Harry smirked. "Yeah, I figured that much out."

"But he can still touch you."

"Yeah, I know that too," muttered Harry. "What does he want?"

"He wants you to talk to him," said Ginger.

"Too bad," said Harry.

"He says you miss him," said Ginger with a scowl.

Harry sent her a glance. "How can I miss him when he follows me everywhere?"

Voldemort's hand came toward Harry face again then and Harry defiantly endured it as knuckles stroked down his face.

Ginger frowned at Harry's pained expression. "Just Apparate into the house."

"He knows I'm too stubborn to do that."

"Harry," sighed Ginger with frustration.

Harry turned and grinned at her then he took her hand. Looking back at Mr. Weasley, he said, "I'm sorry, Mr.-" he stopped and smiled, "Dad. We have to go. Tell mum everything was great."

"All right, Harry," said Arthur. "See you soon."

Harry took a step back, away from the spot cause his headache. "Focus on me, Ging," said Harry and he Apparated them both to Slythindor, what Harry had named the Potter residence.

Ginger looked around their foyer then up at Harry.

Harry smiled at her. "He can't come here until after you give birth, remember."

Ginger returned his smile and wrapped her arms around his neck. "You mean I have Famous Harry Potter alone, all to myself, for the rest of the day?" said Ginny suggestively.

Harry nodded and gave her his most innocent smile. "Want to play chess?"

Ginger laughed. "I'll give you chess," muttered Ginger as she grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the stairs.

Chapter 16

Manipulation

Harry's 6th years filed into the classroom looking annoyed.

"What is the problem?" Harry asked them as they took their seats.

"Voldemort," said Sean. "He's starting to get annoying.

"More annoying than usual," said Missy. "It's depressing."

"Depressing?" said Harry.

"Yes," said Cindy. "He's all upset. Says he's 'wounded' and that you're being stubborn."

"So I am," said Harry amiably. "So what?" Harry knew Voldemort was already there. He had lingered by Harry's desk until the class sat down, then drifted off in the direction of his chair. "He knows how stubborn I am."

"He says if you don't talk to him, he'll *make* you," said Sean.

Harry fought his urge to glance at the chair. "He can't."

"He can still touch you, Professor," said Cindy.

Harry hopped up on to his desk. "He can't punish me. I haven't provoked him," said Harry.

Cindy glanced over at Voldemort's chair and sighed. "Just provocation. Don't ignore me again," she quoted.

Harry smirked. "I'm not ignoring him," Harry argued interested in what Voldemort was trying to accomplish. "I'm punishing him."

Cindy sent the chair another glance. "What?" said Cindy.

"So, he's made you his spokesperson, has he?" said Harry with a grin.

“Sort of,” grumbled Cindy, still looking at the chair with a puzzled expression. “He says, ‘I think I like your punishment to Sirius.’ At least the pain goes away.”

Harry’s grin faded. Was he punishing him unfairly? Sirius had grounded Harry in his 5th year for doing something Harry felt he *had* to do, something that was his nature to do.

As it was Voldemort’s nature to cheat, just as he did. Harry had known it, which was why he had Hermione ready.

Harry sighed. “I get it,” he said.

“Do you know what he’s talking about?” said Missy.

“Yes,” he admitted with a grimace. Lifting his finger to his scar, he thought, *father*.

Voldemort instantly materialized in his chair.

“I have taught you well,” said Voldemort with seriousness.

Harry looked across the room at him and inclined his head in acknowledgment. “You are still the master at manipulation.”

Voldemort chuckled. “How well we know each other, Harry.”

“Yes, well, be that as it may,” said Harry, letting the thought trail off as Voldemort stood up and drifted over to the desk. Harry looked up into his face.

Voldemort reached out and put the back of his hand to Harry’s face. Harry’s eyes closed briefly. When he opened them, Voldemort was studying Harry’s expression with a familiar scrutiny.

“Harry, my son,” said Voldemort. “You have always pleased me and made me proud. This last discovery of yours is quite extraordinary. The concept is even beyond my imaginings. Can you understand it?”

Voldemort’s eyes drifted to rest on Harry’s scar and his hand moved down to his neck. Harry’s throat felt suddenly constricted.

“Our connection transcends even death,” said Voldemort then he quoted Harry pointedly, “It will not go away.” A second hand moved toward Harry’s face. “I am as much a part of you as you are a part of me.”

“I know,” Harry rasped.

“Mm. I know you do,” said Voldemort. He dropped his hands and moved away.

Harry was surprised he was still upright. A glance at the class showed them looking puzzled. Harry wondered...

“No, Harry,” said Voldemort. “I was only talking to you.”

“I hate it when you do that,” said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled as he returned to his chair.

“So what’s the analogy?” asked Cindy. “Why did he compare it to Sirius?”

Harry sighed. He couldn’t tell them ‘we’ll cover that later’ anymore.

“In the beginning, before we had made our first contract, I lost my temper,” said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. “Yes, it was a brilliant display of your power even early on,” said Voldemort. “My Death Eaters should have recognized the signs, but they were not all privy to my ultimate plans at the time.”

“What did you do?” said Sean.

Harry stared at them, struggling with himself. He wasn’t sure if he could bring himself to tell them. He didn’t have to. Not with such a thorough ‘teaching aid.’

“Harry has a few sensitive areas,” said Voldemort. “Especially in direct context with me. Young Mr. Malfoy, who you all know, knew them and used them purposely.”

“Mr. Malfoy used to piss you off on purpose?” said Missy.

Harry couldn't help his grin. “Oh yes,” said Harry. “At first it was simply to see me loose control, but after it was to get me ‘punished.’ We *did* hate each other, after all.”

“Yes, but we digress, Harry,” said Voldemort. “That first time it was, in fact, Lucius that set you off.”

Harry muttered incoherently and Voldemort chuckled again.

“Wasn't it, Harry,” said Voldemort with a grin. “My pet.”

Harry gaze shot up to meet Voldemort's across the room, with a venomous glare.

“Take note,” Voldemort added. “He still abhors that particular endearment.”

The class murmured something but Harry had to snort over Voldemort's semantics. Endearment indeed.

“Anyway,” continued Voldemort. “Lucius returned to my encampment and noted that Harry was still among us. He referred to Harry as ‘the master's new pet.’ Needless to say, Harry lost his as yet uncontrolled temper.”

“What did he do?” said Cindy quietly, noticing Harry wasn't looking at the class.

“He used an Unforgivable Curse, for the first time,” said Voldemort. “I hope I do not have to tell you which one.”

The class reacted with no more than minor surprise. Harry guessed they were indeed starting to understand.

“And,” prompted Rufus.

“And,” echoed Voldemort. “At 15, without a wand, it merely threw Lucius about four feet but the demonstration of his unrestrained

power as well as his subsequent,” he paused to send Harry a glance, “disrespect, warranted his immediate punishment.”

“Disrespect,” Cindy picked up on the word. “What-“

“I told Voldemort that I was out of patience and I was leaving,” said Harry.

“So what does this have to do with Mr. Black?” Dawn wanted to know.

“As it was the first time I punished Harry that severely,” said Voldemort. “Meaning the first time I had touched his scar, no one knew what would happen. When Severus told me how severe the ‘damage’ was, I knew I had to let Harry return to Hogwarts for treatment.”

“Which you did,” supplied Sean.

“Yes, but I wasn’t happy about it,” said Voldemort. “I needed Harry to be with me as much as possible and I hadn’t secured a way to bring him back to me yet. But,” Voldemort added with a somewhat smug grin, “Fate smiles on the patient. While Harry was recovering, word had not reached his godfather that he was safe, and Sirius was able to trace Harry’s scent to my compound.”

“And you caught him,” said Sean.

“Indeed,” said Voldemort.

“And to make a long story short,” said Harry. “I went back to Voldemort. We agreed on a contract so that I could go back to school. Sirius escaped and-“

“Oh, Harry, you are omitting so much.”

“Voldemort.”

“Tell us, Professor,” said Sean. “We can take it.”

Voldemort chuckled. Harry sighed.

“Severus convinced me to allow Harry back to school because he had demonstrated such raw untapped power that I knew he would need training to control it.”

Harry squirmed uncomfortably as the class absorbed that information.

“You see, that was the first time I touched Harry’s scar and therefore it was the first time we had a large dose of power transference,” said Voldemort. “Harry’s power increased quite a bit that first time which he showed by using Cruciatus again, again without a wand, during a duel. That next time, it had a substantial affect on his victim.”

“Who was his victim?”

“Draco, of course,” said Voldemort. “But he had taunted Harry to such an extent, he deserved it.” The last was added with a chuckle.

Harry listened silently as Voldemort described his duel with Draco and the subsequent events until he ultimately came back to the point when Sirius escaped.

It went on. Harry had been trying to vary the telling of his experiences throughout his classes so he was a bit perturbed when almost the exact same ‘lesson’ re-occurred during his 7th year Slytherin class. The difference, surprisingly, being how impressed they were with Harry. Not only over his power at 15...

“You dueled without a wand at 15?” spoken incredulously.

“Throwing Unforgivables?”

But also his tolerance for pain. Even the Dark Four were rendered speechless, as they could now believe it after seeing first hand the effect Voldemort’s touch had on Harry.

It was also during that class that Harry heard something that hadn’t registered the first time he’d heard it.

“Whoa, back up,” said Harry. “You *let* Sirius escape?”

The chuckle. "Of course, Harry," said Voldemort. "I had to see the extent of your honor." Harry blinked at him. "And I wanted your cooperation. I wanted *your* choice. *You* had to choose to come back to me. I wanted *you* to decide what stipulations you wanted for a contract."

Much to Voldemort's delight and Harry's dismay, the Slytherins marveled over this subtle and masterful manipulation. When Harry told them of the subsequent events of Sirius' 'escape,' their praise for his 'flair for dramatics' during the lesson irritated Harry as well.

"Voldemort apparated directly behind me, stuck his wand to my throat and announced to the hall that the contract was breached and that he could kill me right then and there," Harry told them.

"Obviously a power struggle between Lord Voldemort and Professor Dumbledore," said Dante.

Harry nodded. "When I realized what Voldemort was doing, I went back to re-negotiate the contract," said Harry.

"Unfortunately I had already retired for the night," said Voldemort but Harry could hear his amusement. "And my Death Eaters were loath to disturb me."

"Yes, well, his Death Eaters saw it as an opportunity," said Harry. "They beat the crap out of me and tossed me into the cage until morning." Harry went on to describe how they found out at school what he had done and Sirius had grounded him. "I didn't know at the time that it was Dumbledore's counter-manipulation to see how far Voldemort would go for me."

"Which Lord Voldemort had to expect," said Dante. "Right?"

Voldemort chuckled. "Of course," he explained. "Albus' actions were of little consequence to me. My focus was Harry. And," he added. "Albus inadvertently played right into my plans in that particular instance."

"Sirius was *purposely* harsh at the time but Harry didn't know that. Harry had done what he thought was right and honorable (which was) and which is his nature to do."

"Just as it was *your* nature to cheat," said Daray.

Harry watched as the class understood the implications of Harry's recent punishment on Voldemort and Voldemort's manipulation to get Harry to lift the restrictions. And just as his Gryffindors were fascinated by the analogy, the Slytherins were awed by Voldemort's genius.

While it was somewhat disturbing to rehash the events of himself being emotionally played, he could tell it was working. The kids were learning.

The Slytherins now understood the magnitude of what Voldemort was capable of. What he had done in the past (before the scar) as well as since. All precursors of what he could have done in the world had Harry not stopped him yet again 8 years ago.

Harry was getting through to them and it made him inordinately pleased. Unfortunately, he knew there was more that he had to tell them, make them understand.

"We shouldn't be doing this," said Cindy.

"Shut up, Larsen," hissed Dante Manelin. "You agreed to help us."

"It's all right, Cindy," said Sean. "The classroom's empty anyway."

Cassi Abbott raced over to her desk. "It's not here," said Cassi, her voice bordering on panic as she started to check the desks around her own.

"Don't be stupid, Cas," said Dante. "1st year Hufflepuffs have the class after us. Do you think Potter would leave a book like that laying around."

"I guess," said Cassi.

“So just what are we looking for?” said Sean.

“It’s my brother’s book,” said Cindy, taking deep breaths as she moved stuff around on the professor’s desk. “If I don’t get it back, he’ll kill me.”

Dante laughed. “I don’t know what possessed you to bring a book called “Memoirs of a Death Eater” to school anyway,” said Dane with exasperation. “Let alone to class.”

“Memoirs of a Death Eater?” echoed Sean. “You’re kidding?”

“I wanted to ask him if it was credible,” Cassi defended. “You know, if there was any truth to it.”

“Well, whatever,” said Dante. “OK, let’s do it.” He approached the closed door. To his surprise, it opened with no problem. Dante let out his breath. “No wards or anything,” he muttered suspiciously. He turned to the three behind him, all hesitant. “All right, Larsen, go ahead.”

He moved aside to give Cindy room to enter the office.

“I still don’t understand what we need her for,” Cassi complained.

Dante glared at her. “I told you, what if the snakes are in there,” said Dante. “You want to explain to an asp and to Nagini what you’re doing in Potter’s office?”

“I don’t see Nagini,” said Cindy and the two Slytherins joined the Gryffindors within the office.

A loud hiss stopped them all.

Sennie reared his head from the center of the desk of the office.

“What’s it saying?” whispered Cassi.

“It’s a him,” said Cindy with annoyance. “And he’s telling us to state our business.”

“So tell him,” said Dante. “So we can get out of here.” He exchanged a look with McIves as a series of hissing commenced. “Impressive,” said Dante.

Sean shrugged. “You didn’t believe it, did you?”

“He says it’s over there on the bookshelf,” said Cindy with a gesture at the window.

Cassi quickly raced over the shelf. She spotted it easily and picked it up. “Tell him thank-“

They turned to her at her abrupt quiet.

“What’s this?” said Cassi, touching a shallow stone basin engraved with runes and symbols, which sat on the shelf.

The other three moved closer.

“Looks like a Pensieve,” said Cindy.

“Yeah, it does,” said Dante, looking into it. “Wonder if there’s anything in it.”

“Don’t get any brilliant ideas, Manelin,” said Sean. “Abbott’s got her book. Let’s get out of here.”

“Don’t be such a wus, McIves,” said Dante with a snort. “Potter’s been *ordered* to tell us all about his experiences. Whatever is in here-“

“Is obviously *not* in the curriculum,” insisted Sean.

“You don’t *know* that,” argued Dante.

“What’s a Pensieve?” said Cassi as Cindy came closer to her and the basin.

“It sort of hold your memories,” Cindy explained, peering into the silver liquid.

“Looks disgusting,” said Cassi, poking her finger into the mass.

It happened all too fast after that. Cindy grabbed her wrist with a warning. Sean grabbed Cindy's other arm with a curse and Dante took hold of Sean's shoulder in question.

Immediately, all four of them were sucked into the silver solution.

The four youths looked around, getting their bearings. They were in the Great Hall at Hogwarts, which looked, by the size of the crowd of students and the teachers present, to be a Saturday morning. They were closest to the Gryffindor table.

"Hey, doesn't that look like Professor Weasley," Cindy whispered.

"You don't have to whisper," said Dante. "No one can hear us – or see us. We're inside Potter's memory."

"How-"

To demonstrate, Dante waved his hand in front of the closest student's face. Said student waved his hands frantically at the two girls sitting across the table from him. It wasn't until the boy said, "I'm telling you, Harry is going to freak," that the group realized it was none other than Professor Potter's best friend Ron Weasley.

Sean nudged Cindy and she looked up. Harry Potter was striding down the isle toward them.

"He looks so young," said Cassi.

It was hard for the four not to notice how the students at the table stopped talking as he passed them, but their professor appeared not to notice. Meanwhile, the conversation in front of them continued.

"-have to tell him," said Ron insistently.

"Tell who what?" said Harry, sitting down at the table next to him across from Professor Weasley and the girl who was obviously Mrs. Potter. Ginny looked away and Hermione sat there with her mouth open.

Potter looked at Ron. Hermione gasped and when they all followed her gaze toward the doors, they found Mr. Black striding toward them.

Potter stood up as the man approached him and gave him a hug.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Are you all right?" said Sirius Black.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

Black looked at Ron and Ron shook his head. Hermione bit her lip.

"Great," said Potter. "What's going on?"

"Harry, come with me," said Sirius.

"What's wrong now?" said Harry as they moved out of the Great Hall.

"Just come," said Sirius, grabbing the shoulder of Potter's robes.

The four followed them to Dumbledore's office. They noted Professor Lupin, Professor Snape, Professor McGonagall, a couple people they didn't know and Mr. Weasley, the Minister of Magic himself.

"This doesn't look good," said Sean, studying his teacher's expression.

"What's wrong?" said Harry. "What's happened?"

"Come in, Harry," said Dumbledore.

Harry inched in, looking at all the worried faces staring back at him.

One of the men stepped up to him. "Do you know about Azkaban?"

Potter glanced at Snape. "Yes," Harry told the man. "I found out last week."

"Did you aid in any way?"

"What do you mean aid?" said Harry, looking confused.

"Did you help the Death Eaters liberate Azkaban.

"My God, they're interrogating him," said Cassi.

"What?" said Harry, horrified. "No. Why would I? I can't even get near a Dementor without passing out." He looked up at Sirius. Sirius laid a hand on Harry's shoulder.

The four watched in fascination as the boy who was their teacher was questioned.

"Harry," said another man they didn't know. "Have you joined him?"

"What?" now Harry was incredulous. "NO!" He looked around at all the skeptical faces. "What's going on?"

"I told you," said Sirius. "He doesn't know."

Dumbledore nodded.

"Know what?" said Harry.

"Harry," said Dumbledore. "Voldemort has taken steps to make the wizarding world think that you've joined him."

"What?" said Harry. "How?"

"It has a lot of people very afraid."

"But everyone in this room knows that I'd die first," said Harry.

"But to the community-"

"What has he done?" Harry cut the Minister off. He looked at Sirius. "What's he done now?"

Sirius sighed. "The wizarding world thinks he bought you," said Sirius.

"Bought me?" echoed Harry confused again. "I don't understand."

He took the copy of the Daily Prophet he was handed and looked down at it. The four moved closer to look over his shoulder at the headline:

Entire Slytherin Estate Bequeathed To Harry Potter

"So it's true," said Dante.

"You doubted it?" said Sean.

"Yeah, I did," admitted Dante. "But look at him," he gestured at Potter.

"He's legally and publicly made you his heir, Harry," said Sirius.

"He looks devastated," said Cassi.

"He looks like someone just stuck a knife in his back," said Dante.

"NO!" cried Harry, dropping the paper as if it had burned him. He looked around at all the people looking at him and shook his head. "NO," said Harry, taking a step back. "It can't be possible."

"It is possible," said Sirius. "And he did it."

As he started to shake, looking angry and helpless, they could only watch until he turned and ran from the room.

They followed him down to the lake.

"Looks like he wants to throw himself in," muttered Dante.

"I would," said Cindy close to tears.

Suddenly they all felt a strange tingling sensation then a pull as if their bodies were being drawn into themselves.

When it stopped, Sean asked, "What was that?"

Dante smirked. "That's what it feels like when you apparate."

"How do you know, Manelin?" said Sean.

"I'm 17, idiot," said Dante. "I know how to apparate."

"So Professor Potter could apparate before--"

Cindy cut Cassi off in hopes to keep the boys from starting a useless argument. "According to the time line I've made, he was 15 when Voldemort taught him to apparate and 16 when Voldemort left him the Slytherin fortune."

"Time line?" said Dante with interest. "You have a time line?"

"Oh, yes," said Cindy. "Professor Potter jumps around so much, I found it easier to keep track of events."

Sean didn't look surprised but Dante was impressed. "Damn, Larsen," said Dante. "You realize you could sell copies to the 6th and 7th years and make a fortune."

Cindy blushed and began to reply but Cassi stopped her.

"Shh. Look. There's Lord Voldemort," said Cassi. "This must be the famed compound."

The four looked around at the makeshift tents littering the large open area. Several tarps were set up to the south, a line of wizarding tents behind them. Voldemort moved passed them and they realized he was heading toward a large campfire surrounded by several large comfy chairs.

They then notice the younger version of their teacher standing by the fire, staring into the flames, his fists clenched at his sides.

"I wonder why he came here?" said Cassi.

"Probably to find out why," said Cindy.

"Right," Dante agreed. "According to Lord Voldemort, he always got his answers from him and it was always the truth."

Voldemort approached the fire, studying him as he settled into his chair. "I can see by that expression that you heard about my gift," said Voldemort.

Harry looked at him. "Your gift," said Harry incredulously. "I can't be bought."

"Ah, is that what everyone is thinking?"

"As if you didn't plan it," said Harry. Voldemort chuckled. "That was a pretty underhanded tactic, Voldemort. Even for you."

"Harry, I was honoring you," said Voldemort.

"Honoring me," scoffed Harry. "Do I look honored?"

"How do you feel about it then?"

"Angry," said Harry.

"Well, I can see that," said Voldemort. "What else?"

Harry stared back into the fire. "Trapped."

"By what?"

Harry looked up. "By you."

"By me," said Voldemort with surprise. "Harry, I have not trapped you. You have trapped yourself."

"How do you figure that?"

"Choices, Harry. Remember."

"But I won't join you, Voldemort," said Harry. "Trying to convince everyone else that I already have isn't going to change my mind. I know the truth and you know the truth."

"Stubborn," said Voldemort. "But the truth is only how you perceive it."

Professor Potter looked puzzled and frustrated. "I don't understand," said Harry.

"I know, Harry," said Voldemort. "It's very complicated."

"Tell me."

"You are destined to kill me, Harry, but you are also destined to join me."

"How can I do both?" said Harry.

"You will find a way."

"Well that doesn't help much," said Harry.

"Always the cynic, my Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry glared at him.

"It's very simple, Harry," said Voldemort. "Accept me and we will rule the world and share great power." Harry opened his mouth but Voldemort raised a hand. "With the perfect balance of power."

"The prophesy?" said Harry.

"The heirs reunite, the balance of power restored," said Cindy.

"Shut up," hissed Dante.

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin did great things. They created Hogwarts, for one. The only place you and I found happiness as children."

"What are you saying?" said Harry. "That you intend to renounce the dark arts?"

Voldemort laughed. "Oh, no, Harry," said Voldemort. "But what an extraordinary concept that would be." He chuckled again. "It is too late for me. You know I am inherently evil."

Harry sat down, transfixed. The other four moved closer.

"You are inherently good," said Voldemort. "The balance of power."

"You expect the entire Ministry of Magic to step down and let-"

"Oh, they won't. They will need some persuading. But I will deal with that."

"Murder and Mayhem, chaos and anarchy," said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled again. "Well there is always discord before peace and justice is restored," said Voldemort. "That is where you come in."

"Me?" said Harry.

Voldemort stood up and moved around the fire to stand over Harry. Harry flinched and looked up at him. He reached out and touched Harry's face. "You will be as powerful as I am one day, Harry," said Voldemort. "But until that day, you are not ready. Stop fighting your destiny and accept me."

Harry closed his eyes against the obvious pain, but the students could bet it went a lot further than the physical.

When he opened his eyes again, Voldemort was studying him closely. He moved his hand to Harry's chin, holding his face up. Voldemort's stare was frightening in its intensity. And for the first time, what could have been fear entered Professor Potter's expression.

"I have killed your parents. I have tried to kill you. I have tortured you and I have manipulated you," said Voldemort. "But I have also protected you, taught you, given you my magical strength, my favor and my attention. And I have gone to Azkaban for you."

"I have become very fond of you, Harry," said Voldemort. "You have pleased me very much and you have made me very proud. You can make me laugh. Not many people can do that." He raised another hand toward Harry's face but didn't touch him. "I have legally made you my son. Our connection continues to grow. I am as a part of you as you are a part of me."

"You know I'm right, Harry," said Voldemort. "You came to me again today and I have explained everything to you. You always come back to me." Voldemort moved his hands away from Harry's face, still searching Harry's expression. "What does that tell you?"

It was impossible to tell the emotions Harry must have been feeling.

"Go back to school, Harry," said Voldemort. "I have given you much to think about."

Harry turned away from Voldemort to stare into the fire. "Voldemort?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Are you stronger than Dumbledore?"

"I am now," said Voldemort. "The only wizard in the entire world who I can't kill and who can destroy me is Harry Potter and he is now my son."

A very real fear and a very great pain became apparent in his expression then and Cindy gasped on a knot that had lodged in her throat.

That tingling enveloped them all again and they found themselves in a modest teacher's office, obviously back at Hogwarts.

Harry was sitting in a chair in front of a desk, staring at the side of it. Sirius Black stood up from the seat behind it and moved around the desk.

"Harry," said Sirius carefully. He lowered before Harry to look into his face. Harry focused on his dark eyes. "He's winning," said Harry.

"Don't say that, Harry."

"He is," said Harry. "I can't win."

"Harry-"

"It's like he knows everything about me. What I'm thinking, what I'm feeling." Harry's voice went hoarse and he cleared it. "He knows what I'll do before I do it."

"Harry-"

"Sirius," said Harry seriously. "He *is* controlling me. He's beaten me."

Cindy choked on a sob. This time Cassi did too.

"No, Harry," said Sirius. "He's trying to make you think that. He using your emotions to manipulate you."

"I know, but I can't stop him."

"You can," said Sirius. "Fight him."

Harry grabbed Sirius' hand, staring into his eyes. "How, Sirius? Tell me how," pleaded Harry. "He's tearing me apart. Tell me how."

Sirius shook his head. "I don't know."

"My God, he was only 16 for crying out loud," said Cindy, sniffing back tears. "Our age. This is just so horrible."

Sean wrapped a protective arm around her. "Don't Cindy, we-"

The memory started blurring around them, then they re-focused. They found themselves back in the compound again, in front of a tent. The whole area was filled with activity and very crowded.

Cassi gasped and they all looked up to see a young Draco Malfoy striding right toward them. He didn't even notice them as he ducked into the tent. The four followed with interest.

Cindy Larsen paused, slack-jawed as she peered around the office.

"Look at the books," she breathed, obviously recovered from her shock only moments ago.

Sean tugged her through to the other room. "Close your mouth, Cindy, you're drooling," he muttered with amusement.

Harry was standing, looking slightly older from his growth, in front of a large intricately carved wooden cabinet. Malfoy was leaning against the doorframe and had obviously not been noticed yet.

"What the hell?" said Harry, as he looked it over. Eight feet high and seven feet wide and at least four feet deep of what looked like solid mahogany. There were no knobs on the doors. He tried to pull the doors open but couldn't.

He raised a hand. "Alohamora," he said. Nothing happened.

"Try 'open'."

Harry startled and turned to see the other boy standing in the doorway.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" said Harry turning back to the cabinet.

"Lord Voldemort sent me to see if you'd arrived yet," said Malfoy.

"So you just walked on in," said Harry.

"Of course," said Malfoy. "Rude of me, wasn't it?"

Harry turned back to him. Malfoy had his arms crossed over his chest, leaning on the wall and he had a strange grin on his face.

"I'd say it was," said Harry. He gestured at the cabinet. "Do you know what this is?"

"Of course," said Malfoy. "Don't you?"

"No," said Harry, looking back at it. "What did you say to do?"

Malfoy snorted. "Honestly, Potter. You are so pathetic."

"I grew up with Muggles," said Harry with irritation. "Excuse me for living."

Malfoy actually laughed. "No excuse for the Boy Who Lived," said Malfoy.

Harry let his chin fall and shook his head as he realized the joke. "None whatsoever," said Harry, but he couldn't help his own smile. "Poor, pathetic, Harry Potter," muttered Harry under his breath.

"This must be when they started becoming friends," said Cindy with excitement.

"Shut up," came from the other three students who watched the scene with intrigue.

Malfoy snorted. "Pathetic, yes, but poor," said Malfoy. "*That* I know is a lie." Harry sent him an irritated glance. "Even if you do dress the part."

"I hate to bust your misinformed bubble, Malfoy," said Harry. "But there's a perfectly good reason why I'm pathetic and appear poor."

"Oh, really?" challenged Malfoy. "I dare you to tell me."

Harry sighed. "I was clueless until my 11th Birthday."

"You're still clueless, as far as I'm concerned," said Malfoy. Harry turned back to the cabinet. "Wait a minute," said Malfoy as if realizing Harry had been serious. "What do you mean?"

"Forget it," said Harry.

"No," said Malfoy. "Why was famous Harry Potter clueless?"

"That's just it, Malfoy," said Harry. "I didn't know."

"Didn't know what?" said Malfoy, looking confused.

"Now who's being pathetic?" said Harry. "I didn't know anything." Malfoy just stared at him still looking confused. "Why did you think I didn't say much in the robe shop that day?" said Harry.

"I thought you were shy," said Malfoy honestly.

"I had know idea what you were talking about," said Harry. "School houses, Quidditch-"

"You'd never heard of Quidditch?"

"I never heard of Hogwarts until I got my letter," said Harry. "I didn't even know I was a wizard."

Malfoy looked skeptical. In fact all four students could only gape at the revelation.

"Yeah, famous Harry Potter didn't know he was a wizard," said Malfoy

"Yeah well, famous Harry Potter didn't know he was famous until Hagrid tracked us down and broke into the cabin where my aunt and uncle were hiding me."

"They were hiding you?" said Malfoy confused again.

"They didn't want me to find out I was a wizard," said Harry. "They think I'm a freak. They told me I got this scar in the car crash that killed my parents."

"They what?" said the Gryffindor students.

Malfoy's jaw actually dropped open. "They what?"

Harry only nodded. "Over night I went from being just Harry, treated no better than a house elf to famous Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived."

Malfoy stared hard at him and they could see the minute he believed him. "You didn't know about Voldemort?"

"Nope," said Harry. "Hermione knew more about me than I did when I first started at Hogwarts. Hell, you probably knew more about me than I did." Malfoy continued to stare at him for a minute then he laughed. "Thanks, a lot, Malfoy," said Harry. "So glad I've amused you."

"I'm sorry," said Malfoy. "It's just so ironic." Harry only nodded. "Well that explains the pathetic part," said Malfoy. "What about the poor. You found out about the money."

"Yes. Hagrid showed me my vault," said Harry. "But there was no way I was going to let the Dursleys know I had inherited a fortune."

"That I can understand now," said Malfoy. "But you live with Black now."

"What's your point?" said Harry with frustration.

Malfoy gestured at the cabinet and Harry looked back at it. He reached out and touched the smooth surface of the door. "Just tell it to open, Potter," said Malfoy.

Harry sent him a glance. "Open," said Harry.

The doors sprung open wide, revealing a vast amount of robes, cloaks, trousers, shirts and jumpers hanging in an orderly fashion. Harry stared at it.

"It's a wardrobe, you git," said Malfoy.

"I can see that," said Harry, reaching out to touch one of the shirts. The softest material he ever felt slid through his fingers. "What's it doing here?" said Harry softly.

"Well obviously because it's yours."

"Mine?" said Harry with doubt as he touched another shirt. "This is more like the stuff you wear, Malfoy."

"Noticed, did you?" said Malfoy. "You possess quite possible the worst fashion sense imaginable."

Sean nudged Dante and the other looked up as Lord Voldemort moved to the doorway behind Draco Malfoy.

"He looks pretty good," said Dante. "Considering."

Sean stifled his snort. "Yeah, it looks like he's rejuvenating," he murmured.

"Why?" said Harry, looking at Voldemort.

Malfoy looked confused.

"Harry," said Voldemort, startling Malfoy who looked about to fall over at seeing Voldemort behind him. "You are the most powerful boy in the world. I won't have my son dressing like a peasant."

"But-"

"Harry," interrupted Voldemort. "Don't you like them?"

"Well, yes, but-"

"Very good," said Voldemort with a smile. "What pleases you, pleases me, my son. I will see you both at dinner." With that, he turned and left.

Harry stared after him, his fists had clenched, his jaw locked. He turned back to the cabinet and reached out. Very slowly and carefully, he closed the doors and turned away from them.

"Potter?"

Harry looked up at Malfoy. "So now you know," said Harry. Malfoy looked puzzled. "Voldemort can't kill me," said Harry in a soft voice. "So he's driven me to insanity instead."

Malfoy smiled but it looked forced. "Well, if it's any consolation, he's gone off the deep end where you're concerned as well."

"It's not," muttered Harry as he fell into a chair.

"Well shake it off," said Malfoy. He opened Harry's wardrobe and pulled out some clothes. Tossing them on the bed, he said, "Wear that."

"Malfoy?"

He turned back. "What?"

"What kind of dinner is it?"

"Just dinner," said Malfoy. "There aren't many Death Eaters here yet."

"I don't dine with Death Eaters," said Harry tonelessly.

"So high and mighty are we," said Malfoy. "Fine, piss off the Dark Lord if you want to."

"Ask me if I care," said Harry, staring at the far wall, looking lost.

"Do you care?" said Malfoy. Harry's expression twisted and he choked. "Don't know which is worse, do you, Potter?" said Malfoy. "The internal anguish or the external torture."

Harry's gaze shot up to stare at Malfoy.

Malfoy crossed his arms again and nodded. "He's getting to you, isn't he?"

Harry looked away. "I'd rather have the physical torture."

"Maybe," said Malfoy. "But you still have choices."

"What do you mean?"

"He can't force you to do anything but visit him, right," said Malfoy. "You can chose to wear the clothes he's given you or not. You can accept his fortune or not. You can use the tent he has provided for you, or not. You can eat with his Death Eaters or not and he won't do a damn thing to you either way. I bet you could even lose your temper and he wouldn't punish you."

Harry blinked at him.

"I on the other hand am forced."

"How is he forcing you?" said Harry. Malfoy sighed and moved back into the room. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"No, I think I should," said Malfoy. "Mind if I sit down?" Harry nodded his permission and Malfoy sat on the end of the bed. "First off, I don't have half the tolerance for pain that you or my father have."

"Fear of torture?" said Harry.

"For starters," said Malfoy. "You've seen him torture with the Cruciatus Curse, I know." Malfoy went on, "But have you ever seen him punish anyone with the Dark Mark?"

"No," said Harry. "I didn't know he could."

Malfoy nodded. "With the Dark Mark, he has almost complete domination over the Death Eaters. He can punish and reward with it."

Harry was listening with interest but the other four present were more than interested. They were shocked and appalled by much of the information they were hearing.

"You come when he calls, or you're punished. You do what he says when he says it, or you're punished. You don't do it to his satisfaction, you're punished. You please him and you're rewarded. You betray him and you're dead."

Malfoy rubbed the back of his neck as if a knot had formed there.

"Go on," said Harry softly.

"My father is a very powerful wizard," said Malfoy without his usual arrogance. "And he has an exorbitant amount of pride. He was forced to publicly renounce his master once for my mother and I and to spare the family name, but he will not do it again. He's sworn it to Lord Voldemort and to my mother and me. Thusly, he will do the Dark Lord's bidding or take the consequences."

"He wants you," said Harry. "Doesn't he?"

Malfoy nodded. "If I don't do what I'm told, it's my father's fault." Malfoy looked away. "Ever watch someone you love tortured because of something you did or didn't do?"

"No," admitted Harry. "But he's used that-"

"Exactly, which is why I knew you would understand why I'm here."

Harry lowered his voice. "But what about Dumbledore?"

Malfoy shrugged. "I lead a double life." Harry slumped back in his chair. "Which is exactly what you're doing," said Malfoy. "Sneaking to visit without the Ministry finding out."

Harry stared at Draco Malfoy. "You do understand," said Harry softly.

Malfoy nodded and stood up. "So now you know," said Malfoy.

Harry nodded back. "Malfoy," said Harry. "I know you took out that book on prophecies. Have you read the prophecies?"

"Of course," said Malfoy. "Required reading for a Death Eater."

"You're - er - I mean, you're not one yet, are you?"

Malfoy pulled up his sleeve. His skin was unmarked. "Not yet," said Malfoy, a shadow of a smile surfaced. "That's going to be one hell of a fight between my parents when that day arrives." He looked at Harry. "So what about the prophecies?"

"Do you think I'm supposed to join Voldemort?" said Harry.

"Are you asking me my opinion, Potter?" said Malfoy.

"Yes," said Harry.

Malfoy stared hard at him for a moment then paced a few steps. "Well," said Malfoy, "if you believe in all that destiny and fate crap, than I'd say you were screwed."

Dante snorted and Cindy smacked his arm.

"Great," muttered Harry.

"But if you look at it more symbolically, then the fact is that you've already 'united.'"

Harry sat up. "What do you mean?"

Malfoy continued to pace as if he'd already done some thinking on this. "Well," said Malfoy. "You two have been sucking power off each other for a couple of years now. He's given you powers beyond belief."

You're both a part of each other now - which is what is tearing you apart and which is frustrating Voldemort."

"What?"

"You've gotten to him, Potter," said Malfoy. "He didn't expect it to happen but it has. When you don't visit, he goes berserk. When you are here, he's totally different, relaxed, confident, even happy." Malfoy looked at Harry again. "And you, as much as you hate it, you find the need to come back here."

Harry closed his eyes.

"It's like you've magically bonded, Potter," said Malfoy. "And there is nothing either one of you can do about it."

It looked like having his deepest fears spoken out loud by a sort of neutral party made Harry's chest clench up. He opened his eyes. Malfoy was looking at him from across the room. Harry swallowed. "And," Harry prompted.

"And," said Malfoy with an odd grin, "if I were you, which I'm glad I'm not."

Harry grimaced.

"I'd enjoy all this." Malfoy gestured around the room. "Accept all his gifts and enjoy it while you can. Then," said Malfoy. "When it comes down to the ultimate choice..." he trailed off.

"What," said Harry, desperately.

"Only you can answer that," said Malfoy too seriously for Harry.

"That's encouraging, Malfoy," muttered Harry. "Thanks a lot."

Malfoy sighed and Harry lifted his gaze to meet his again.

"Oh don't be so pathetic, Potter," said Malfoy. "The world doesn't need anymore tragic heroes." He glanced at his watch. "Dinner is in half an hour, and it's a free menu meal, which are usually good." He

glanced at the clothes he had thrown on Harry's bed. "Test my theory, Potter," said Malfoy. "See how pleased he is when you show up at dinner dressed to kill."

With that, Malfoy strolled out.

The four watched Harry get up and move into an adjoining room.

"Well, that was weird," said Cassi.

"Weird?" echoed Dante incredulously. "Man, how would you feel if the most evil, most brilliant Dark Lord turned all his focus, all his deviousness on the sole purpose of bending you to his will?"

Sean was silent for a moment. "I'd cave," he admitted at length.

"All that emotional turmoil and manipulative foresight," said Cindy miserably.

"And if you remember, Potter said that Voldemort only marked Draco Malfoy because of him," said Dante. "It was obvious that Malfoy didn't want the Mark."

"Yes and—"

Cindy blushed and turned around. The others turned to see Harry re-enter the room with just a towel wrapped around his waist. He rubbed another towel over his head, drying his hair, and looked down at the clothes Malfoy had told him to wear.

"Why not," he said, reaching for them.

"Oh, dear," said Cassi, but Harry had turned around, giving them a full view of his back.

They didn't even notice him pulling on boxers or his trousers, their gazes were fixed on the scars that covered his back.

"Those are lash marks," said Dante.

Cindy gasped. "Are you sure?"

Dante nodded. "I've seen them," he paused, "on house-elves."

Harry sighed as he pulled the red silk shirt around him. The clothes fit him to perfection. He stepped in front of the mirror as he tucked in the shirt and looked surprised at his reflection.

He turned back around, looking almost self confident. The girls sighed and Dante rolled his eyes, but even he had to admit that he looked good.

Harry glanced at his watch and he raised his hand.

"Commentary," said Harry.

"Oh I wonder what the watch says," said Cindy.

But their teacher only smirked at it. Grabbing a brush, he attacked the untidy mass until he gave up and shook it out. His bangs fell naturally over his forehead, his scar almost completely covered.

He turned to the wardrobe and searched the contents. He pulled out a black cloak.

Fastening the gold clasp at his shoulder, he spied a small box within the wardrobe. There was a vast display of jewelry within.

Sean whistled. "That must have cost a fortune."

Harry sighed and picked out a gold chain with a medallion in the shape of a phoenix with gem stone eyes, one red and one green, and clasped it around his neck. He picked it up off his chest and stared at it.

"That's the Talisman," said Cassi.

"No kidding," said Sean. "One of Voldemort's gifts."

"Gift," said Cindy, her brow furrowed in thought. "Hmm."

Harry left the tent and the memory started to fade and blur again.

It refocused again and again they were inside what was obviously their professor's tent. This time they followed him out into the compound.

"How much time do you think he spent here?" said Sean.

"I'd say a lot," said Dante. "Wasn't that what Lord Voldemort wanted. To spend as much possible with him as possible."

Sean had to agree.

The camp was dark and very quiet. The group stopped behind Harry at a tent.

"Voldemort," called Harry from the entrance.

"Come in, Harry," said Voldemort. "What can I do for you?"

"Wow," said Cindy as they followed Harry into the tent. "This looks just like Professor Potter's tent."

Dante smirked at her. "Of course it does. Lord Voldemort is brilliant, especially in these little subtleties."

The Dark Lord was sitting behind his desk, a book open before him. Harry glanced at Voldemort's bookshelves then back to Voldemort.

"I was wondering if you had any books on types of fencing swords," said Harry.

"I might," said Voldemort. "You are welcome to look if you wish." He swept a hand toward the shelves.

"Thanks," said Harry as he moved to them, browsing the titles.

"Are you enjoying your lessons?" said Voldemort.

"Oh yes," said Harry. "Lucius is an excellent teacher. Did he tell you about today?"

"Of course," said Voldemort.

Harry nodded, running his hand over the spines of books as he inspected the titles. He pulled a book off the shelf with obvious excitement and flipped eagerly through it.

He turned to Voldemort and froze. Voldemort was standing behind him, just outside the flinch zone.

"Of course you may borrow it, Harry," said Voldemort.

Their gaze's became locked much like in class. Voldemort reached out a hand and let his fingers brush down Harry's cheek. Harry endured it, staring into Voldemort's eyes.

"You are pleased with this visit," said Voldemort, his hand still on Harry's face. "I know you are."

Harry was quiet. Sean was sure it was because he couldn't speak.

"You are safe, contented and you have your freedom," said Voldemort. "You are happy here right now, Harry."

Voldemort glanced down briefly and picked up the medallion which lay on Harry's chest before returning his gaze to Harry's. "I knew you'd favor this one," said Voldemort.

Voldemort dropped both his hands and stepped back.

"Come in, Lucius," said Voldemort.

The four swung around as Lucius Malfoy stepped into the room.

"How long was he here for?"

"So that's where Draco gets it from."

"Shhh!" Dante quieted the girls.

"Master," said Lucius. "You did tell me-"

Voldemort waved it off. "Yes, yes. I know. Come in. Harry just came in to borrow a book." Voldemort glanced back at Harry, then looked at Lucius. "A book on types of fencing swords I believe."

Lucius stepped further into the tent and sent Harry an understanding smile.

Harry closed the book that still lay open in his hand. "I'll see you both tomorrow," said Harry and he left.

They followed him back into the quiet compound. Young Professor Potter moved back toward his tent, his expression downcast and troubled. The four moved to follow him but their path was soon blocked by a tall, black cloaked figure.

Professor Severus Snape glared down at them.

"Come on," said Sean, grabbing Cindy's arm. "He can't see us, remember."

"Ah, McIves," said Dante, carefully. "He's looking right at us."

"He's-" Sean looked up and stopped mid-sentence as he spied the Potion Master's smirk. "Er."

"I'm wondering," said Snape to no one in particular. "What the punishment might be for a transgression of this magnitude."

"Prof-"

Cassi was cut off as Snape grabbed the two boys by the arms. They in turn took a hold of the girls as they were lifted out of the memory.

Professor Snape dumped them on the floor of the DADA teacher's office.

"Or perhaps, you'd all like to see, first hand," Snape continued. "Harry Potter's famed and formidable temper? Hmm?"

The four looked up.

Standing in the doorway of his office, with an expression which had surpassed violence and transcended murder, was Professor Potter.

Chapter 17

Lessons and Learning

Harry put every bit of rage, insult and anguish he could muster into the look he bestowed on his students. He stepped into the office, opening a path out the door. Fists clenching, he spoke with forced calm and ominous quiet.

“Get out.”

The four students scrambled to their feet and bolted.

Harry watched them leave and turned to Severus Snape.

“Impressive, Potter,” was all he said.

Harry bit his lip, then surrendered to a laugh. “Think I scared them?” said Harry.

“Sure frightened me,” said Snape.

Harry snorted. “Yeah, I’m sure,” he said as he approached his desk. Sennie coiled up his arm as he lowered it.

“You did well, Sennie.”

“I did nothing but point out the book, Master,” said Sennie. “They needed no encouragement.”

“Figures,” murmured Harry. “My curious Gryffindors.” He looked up at Snape again. “I think I covered quite a bit with that ‘lesson.’”

“Indeed,” said Severus. “I give it until tomorrow night for it to successful go through all the houses.”

“Mmm,” Harry agreed. “I had hoped to have Missy with them. She seems to be Gryffindor’s biggest leak.”

Snape nodded. “But Miss Abbott will adequately make up for it. Additionally, I’m sure Mr. McIves and Miss Larsen are relaying the whole incident to the Gryffindor Common Room now.”

Harry sighed and moved over to the Pensieve. He pulled out his wand to retrieve his memories but pain exploded in his head.

"Damn it, Voldemort," said Harry, leaning heavily against the bookshelf. "Not so close."

The chuckle. "Sorry, Harry."

"I doubt that," mumbled Harry.

"I told you it would work," said Voldemort.

"Yes, yes," said Harry as he began replacing the memories. "Feel free to gloat."

"But, Harry," said Voldemort. "You have managed to totally enthrall the Slytherins. Mr. Manelin is now detailing the experience to the rest of the 7th years."

"Great," muttered Harry.

"And I must say," Voldemort went on with unmistakable pride. "He has quite a flair for dramatics. He has them rapt."

Harry glanced at Severus. "I swear," he said, "if I see pity tomorrow, I'll hex them all into next year."

"Not that they don't deserve it," said Severus. "But we *are* teachers."

Harry laughed softly. Voldemort added his own chuckle and drifted closer to Harry.

"As I said before," said Voldemort. "The students know who you are. You are merely showing them how you got there."

"I know," said Harry, touching the tip of his wand to the silver surface again.

The last memory flitted through his consciousness and he instinctively closed his free hand around the medallion laying against his chest under his shirt.

"I knew you'd favor this one."

Pain rippled through him as Voldemort put a hand to his face and lifted his chin.

"Harry," said Voldemort. "You are as a part of me as I am a part of you."

A shudder ran through him, his internal magic surfacing to block out the pain from Voldemort's touch.

"Mmm." Voldemort's eyes closed as if he could feel it. "Very good, Harry."

Harry sighed and took a step back, letting go of the medallion.

"Harry?"

Harry turned to Severus, who had a strange expression on his face.

"What?"

"Where is Draco?"

Harry shrugged, moving around his desk to sit down behind it. "He hasn't gotten back from South America yet," said Harry. "Why?"

Severus sent Voldemort a wary look then made a dismissive gesture. "Just wondering."

Harry paused at the door to his classroom to listen. He had purposely skipped dinner in the Great Hall last night and accidentally missed breakfast due to a firecall this morning.

He now held the 'offensive' book in his hand again. Severus confiscated it last night and Harry, thanks to the fire chat with Mrs. Abbott this morning, now had permission to peruse it for as long as he liked, provided of course that he autograph the book for her son. It was his book after all. Slytherins! They did nothing without self-serving motivation.

"So when are we talking about?" Harry heard Rufus' voice.

“Look,” said Cindy Larsen.

The rustle of parchment could be heard and Harry leaned slightly forward, peering around the doorframe. A rather large group was crowded around Cindy’s desk.

“So, when did he lose the glasses?” Rufus wanted to know.

“It’s hard to tell,” Cindy’s voice rose from the center of the crowd. “I don’t think we have a precise time.”

“He wasn’t wearing them 6th year when he got the inheritance,” said Sean.

“It was just after Halloween,” said Harry as he strolled into the classroom. “My 5th year.”

The students all scattered to their seats.

Harry stopped before his desk, laid the book on it then turned to the class and crossed his arms over his chest. His gaze swept over the now silent Gryffindors and stopped at Cindy, who was moving things around on her desk in a vain attempt to conceal something.

“What’s that, Miss Larsen?” said Harry.

“Hmm? What, Professor?”

“That piece of parchment you’re trying to hide?”

“Er - this?” said Cindy, holding up the quickly folded paper. “It’s just an old charms test.”

Harry raised an eyebrow and stifled a snort. “Miss Larsen,” said Harry. “You have done little to endear yourself to me since yesterday,” the girl paled at the reminder, “I suggest you don’t compound my irritation by lying.”

Cindy swallowed hard. “Sir.”

A chuckle drew the class' eyes to Voldemort's chair. "Need anyone remind you of the medallion Harry wears around his neck?" said Voldemort.

Cindy brought her gaze back to Harry and swallowed again. With a deep breath, her chin inched up. "Sorry, sir, but it's a study aid," she informed flatly. "As distasteful as it might be, we will be tested on it."

Harry almost laughed. Missy, as well as most of the class looked appalled by Cindy's statement. Sean looked shocked.

"Well said, Miss Larsen," said Voldemort, obviously amused. "A typical Gryffindor attitude."

"Yes," said Harry, extending his arm and summoning the paper. "So let's have a look."

Hopping onto his desk, he surveyed what was in essence a time line of the events that occurred in his life from his 15th birthday. A fairly accurate one at that. And to his dismay, one side of line listed the events, the other detailed the results and or effects.

"I'm impressed," said Harry. "I wasn't aware that I covered so much."

"Some of it is from Professor Dumbledore's account which is now a part of 'Hogwarts: A History' as well as in the text 'A Second Rise and Fall,'" said Cindy.

Harry nodded absently, then sent the timeline back to Cindy.

"To clarify the answer to Rufus' question," said Harry. "I first started wearing contact lenses after Voldemort explained the wizarding world's plan for me - or rather," he sent Voldemort a glance, "when he made me work out the plan."

"In a simplified way, he made me understand that due to all the blood and magical connections-

"Which only got stronger," Voldemort inserted.

Harry only acknowledged the comment with a glance. "That were I to kill him, I would die myself."

"That's the legend," said Sean. "But why?"

"You tell me," said Harry. "What are my connections to Voldemort?"

"Your scar," said Lucas.

Harry nodded. "Blood or magic?" he quizzed.

"Er - both?" Lucas answered not quite sure.

"It was a magical curse that failed," said Sean.

"But it failed because of his mother's sacrifice," said Missy. "Her love."

"But it has to be blood too," said Cindy. "Because they used the blood thing to insure his protection at his relatives, since his aunt has the same blood."

"Right, go on," Harry prompted.

"And Voldemort has that protection now," said Sean. "Because he used Professor Potter's blood for the potion that restored him to his body."

"Right," said Missy. "And he also used that Wormtail guy's flesh."

"And that's another magical bond because Professor Potter saved Pettigrew's life," said Cindy. "So they both shared the blood and magical bonds of a wizard's life debt."

Voldemort chuckled. "I think they have grasped the concept, Harry."

Harry only sent him a nod.

"So what did the wizarding world want Harry to do?" Voldemort quizzed them.

"Well obviously, they wanted him to kill you," said Sean.

“Yes,” said Voldemort. “But at what cost?”

There was silence as the class absorbed it.

Voldemort nodded. “So at 15, finding out that the world wanted to sacrifice him to rid themselves of me, what would young Harry do?”

The class stared at Harry as if hesitant to actually say the words. Harry grinned at them. “You can say it,” said Harry. “I ran. But,” he added pointedly, “I only did it because I wanted to think.”

“And of course the last time Harry ran, allegedly when Sirius Black was after him, the entire world was on the look out for him,” said Voldemort.

“Oh,” said Dawn with excitement. “You used a disguise.”

Harry hopped off his desk and went around it. He pulled his yearbook out of a drawer and flipped through it until he found the picture Colin had taken of him in the common room with Fred and George. He had forgotten about the black eye.

He passed the book around to the fascination of the students.

“That’s you?” said Sean. “I wondered who that person was. There’s one in the case on the Wall.”

Harry explained the Muggle tricks he used and the little campsite he had made as the book made its way around the class.

“How did you get your face to look so gaunt?” asked Dawn.

Harry sighed. “All things considered, I couldn’t eat or sleep,” said Harry. “And when I went to Voldemort’s compound to ask for his help, the Death Eaters didn’t recognize me, even my voice was different, so they beat me up.”

Dawn looked horrified.

“Hence the black eye,” supplied Sean.

“Yes,” said Harry.

"What I don't get," said Lucas. "Is why it had to be you."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, why was everyone so convinced that *you* had to be the one to kill him?" said Lucas.

"No one was powerful enough," said Cindy impatiently.

"I get that." Lucas spared her an annoyed glance. "But really, anyone could have suffocated him while he was sleeping or snuck up behind him and strangled him or—"

Voldemort's laughter cut him off.

"Be nice, Voldemort," said Harry with a grin. "It's a perfectly logical question."

"Mr. Wilson," said Voldemort. "I had already taken a vast amount of steps, even before I was returned to my body, to insure that I couldn't be killed by simple mortal means."

"Yes, not to mention that his compound was hidden," said Cindy. "No one but those he allowed could get close to him."

"Children," Voldemort called their attention back to himself in a patient tone Harry recalled from years ago. "In order to get through my defenses, a wizard would have to be trusted enough to be close to me and powerful enough magically to match or surpass my barriers."

"Professor Potter," inferred Sean.

"Indeed."

"And you let him," said Lucas. "Get close to you."

"Oh yes," said Voldemort. "I had my reasons, as you all know, and, of course, it happened to coincide with what the Ministry needed, although they didn't comprehend the big picture yet. Only Dumbledore understood."

"So Professor Dumbledore allowed all the visits, all the manipulations?" said Missy with surprise.

"Oh yes," said Voldemort. "Albus encouraged it, endorsed it." He chuckled. "Cunning old coot. He was counting on Harry's ability to charm his way into people's lives to work on me." Voldemort stood up and floated to the front of the class.

Harry kept quiet from behind his desk, listening intently to some things he hadn't known.

"While all my brilliant manipulations were working on Harry," Voldemort went on, "All his desires, hopes and needs were being provided for by me. He needed me, depended on me.

"But at the same time, Dumbledore's plan was working as well. I was possessive, protective and just as dependant on him," Voldemort confessed. "I wanted, needed him to be solely reliant on me and me alone."

Harry saw Cindy and Sean share a glance.

"Did you really level your compound once because Professor Potter didn't visit you?" said Cindy softly.

Harry laughed - had to. "Where did you hear that?"

"Er," Cindy glanced at Sean. "Cassandra Abbott's book."

"Ah," said Harry, picking up said book. "Professor Snape confiscated this for me last night. I have permission from Mrs. Abbott to - shall we say - validate it."

"You will need me to do that," said Voldemort. "Won't you, Harry?"

Harry looked up at him, hovering just outside the flinch zone. "Will I?"

"How will you know if something happened when you weren't there?"

"Good point."

“For example,” Voldemort turned back to the class. “I did indeed level the compound, in truth, twice because Harry was taking too long to visit me.”

“You did?” said Harry with surprise. “I never heard that.”

Voldemort chuckled. “It was not something you needed to know at the time.”

“When?” said Cindy eagerly as she pulled out her timeline.

Voldemort appeared thoughtful. “The first time was just after Harry found out that the second contract was void. After his trial. He was strong enough to keep me from apparating with him out of Hogwarts and he defied me to use my only advantage to get him to come to me.”

“What advantage was that?” said Dawn.

“Touching my scar would insure my focus was on him,” Harry told them, “as well weaken me enough to apparate with.”

“But he didn’t,” said Dawn curiously.

“Oh no,” said Voldemort. “I would not destroy the tentative trust I had from Harry.” He turned to Harry. “I believe that is the occurrence mentioned in that book.”

Harry flipped through the book. There was a pen and ink sketch of what could have been a forest fire site.

“What does it say, Professor?”

Harry skimmed through until he found the passage.

“The Master returned from Hogwarts today after another attempt to retrieve Master Harry,” Harry read. “His fury was apparent on his face but his rage and frustration with the boy’s stubbornness made itself clear when he lifted his wand and cast a spell into the campfire. The initial explosion captured the attention of any and all Death Eaters who were in the compound, which was beneficial as he then turned

and destroyed each tent one by one until all that remained was a wasteland of ash and smoke.

“Malfoy, arrogant fool that he is, approached the Master then and spoke briefly to him. The Master backhanded him in the face for his impertinence - a mild punishment to say the least - but Malfoy’s words must have been consoling because the Master calmed himself and barked at us to leave.

“As I was one of the last to leave, I noticed that the first tent the Master restored was the boys.”

Harry looked up at Voldemort. He wanted to question his restoration priority but first he wanted to know, “What did Lucius say to you?”

Voldemort frowned at him. “Harry-”

“I’m asking,” said Harry pointedly.

“Lucius reminded me that you were fighting me as was your nature,” said Voldemort, his expression intense. “And your stubbornness was also a part of your nature.”

“And,” prompted Harry.

Voldemort smirked. “And that it was all part of what made you you. What made you worthy to join me.”

Harry smirked back at him.

“When was the next time?”

Harry looked back at the class. He’d almost forgotten they were there. He sent Voldemort a questioning look.

“The second wasn’t nearly so destructive,” said Voldemort, waving his hand dismissively. “It was more a demonstration of pique than anything else. The only notable factor of it is-”

“That it was because of Professor Potter,” Cindy inserted.

“Precisely, Miss Larsen.”

"Who wrote this anyway?" said Harry, flipping through the front pages. The author was noted as anonymous. It had to be someone in the inner circle. Only someone with constant presence in and exposure to the compound could have reported on some of the events mentioned within the pages.

"Professor, did you really toast Lord Voldemort during one of the celebrations?" Sean asked.

Well, Harry guessed Voldemort had owned up to a couple of his failings so...

"I did," he admitted. "It was during a celebration which coincidentally fell on the day I defeated Vandewater the first time."

"After you were cured from the Vengeance Curse?" said Sean.

"Yes," said Harry. "Lucius Malfoy was toasting me and - er."

Voldemort chuckled. "Harry, being the modest soul that he is, turned the toast to me. He had defeated an Acknowledged Master and conquered yet another dark curse on a very prestigious day."

"What day was that?" Missy asked.

Harry wondered if Voldemort wanted it known but should have guessed that Voldemort would want to gloat.

"It was my birthday," said Voldemort, his delight obvious. "Harry honored me greatly that day. As always, he made me very proud."

There was a gasp from the back of the room. Harry followed the sound to Moira Keane, a tiny witch who was mostly quiet and shy although her grades in all her classes were among the highest in her year.

"You cared," she squeaked.

The class looked a bit confused but Voldemort studied the girl intently.

"Indeed," said Voldemort.

"Comment, Miss Keane?" said Harry.

"That's what happened - at the end," she said breathlessly. "My father's a prosecutor for the Wizengamot. I know about wizards debts. He even speculated himself that it could have happened but..."

"Spit it out Moira," said Cindy impatiently. She obviously didn't think that someone else could have figured something out before her.

"Lord Voldemort conceded his debt, didn't he?" said Moira, her small face pale with realization. "He *wanted* you to live."

The girl looked around as silence fell upon the room. The rest of the class appeared startled at first, then simply wondrous.

Harry looked to Voldemort. He was obviously trying to repress either a smug smirk or a triumphant laugh. Harry rolled his eyes at him, which got him the chuckle.

"Very good, Miss Keane," Voldemort addressed the class. "That is why Harry lived, why I am immortalized in apparition and why we are still connected."

The bell rang and Harry stood up. "Miss Larsen, I'd like you to distribute copies of that timeline of yours - as it is at this moment," said Harry. "For homework, I want you all to fill in whatever you can around what Miss Larsen has. Hand it in next time. Dismissed."

As the class began leaving, Harry sat at his desk and couldn't help picking up the book.

"Professor?"

He looked up. "Yes, Mr. McIves?"

"Er, we were wondering-"

"Wondering, what?" Harry prompted.

"Well, I mean-"

"You haven't taken points," Cindy Larsen jumped in to add.

“Or given us detention,” said Sean.

Harry glanced around. The rest of the students had left. Only Missy lingered by the door, waiting for her friends.

“Ah,” said Harry to the errant students before him. “Did you want detention? I’m sure Mr. Filch would be-”

“Well, no, Professor,” Sean quickly interrupted.

“Tell me,” Harry bade, “What did you see?”

“Your memories, sir,” said Sean. Cindy was wringing her hands.

“Mm, yes. Imagine that. A pensieve with selected memories just laying around.”

“We had no right,” said Cindy.

“No you didn’t,” said Harry. He sighed and allowed his expression to lose it’s hard edge. “I seem to recall falling into a pensieve myself in my day.”

Sean and Cindy shared a glance.

“You didn’t get detention then either?” said Sean.

“No,” Harry admitted. “I used what I saw to work out the problems I was dealing with at the time.”

“But this is different,” said Cindy. At Harry’s questioning look, she went on, “This was - is - your actual life, your, well, your nightmare.”

Harry nodded gravely, unsure how he had kept a straight face. “Yes it is, and, to quote, as distasteful as it is, you will be tested on it.”

Two jaws dropped open.

“You wanted us to- to,” Sean stammered.

A familiar chuckled filled the room. “Your Gryffindors are a little slow today, Harry.”

Harry ignored him. "That little 'accident' of yours," Harry told them, "Covered a lot of ground and saved me quite a bit of classroom time." The two continued to stare at him and he smiled at them. "He taught me well."

The two started to leave. Half way to the door Sean turned back.

"Professor?"

"Yes?"

"How did you get the scars?"

Cindy blanched beside him. Missy gasped from the doorway.

Harry was puzzled. "Scars?"

Sean sent Cindy a glance but apparently wouldn't be put off. "The scars on your back," he clarified. "Manelin said they looked like lash marks."

It took a few moments but Harry then recalled that the first time he'd been lashed, Rowan wasn't around to heal him. He rubbed his hands over his face, leaning back in his chair.

"Ah, those," he said. He looked intently at the three as they stepped closer to his desk. Damn curious Gryffindors. "If you recall," he told them, "I resisted Voldemort from the very beginning. The only reason I made the contract to begin with was to..." He looked at the kids expectantly.

"Protect your friends and family from him," Cindy answered.

Harry nodded. "From Voldemort," he specified. "But I was also given 'Voldemort's almighty protection.' Which was protection from everyone who might want to hurt me, including his Death Eaters."

"You didn't want his protection," said Cindy with understanding.

"Clever girl."

Harry ignored Voldemort's chuckle. "No. Because he wanted me to. I didn't want to do *anything* he wanted me to do, unless I *had* to."

"He had one of his Death Eaters lash you?" Missy was aghast. "T-that's so--"

"Not entirely accurate," said Voldemort, insulted.

"But close enough," said Harry. "The test was to see if I would *use* his protection. By exposing the Death Eater's treatment, I would be 'running to him' so to speak."

"You wouldn't do that," said Sean, insulted on Harry's behalf.

"Of course he wouldn't," said Voldemort. "But I had to make it clear that if Harry wasn't protected from my Death Eater's than neither were his friends."

"But th-that's j-just so-" Missy was stammering again.

Voldemort smirked.

"So he manipulated you again, to get what he wanted," said Sean with a resigned sigh.

"Yes, but I got him back the next time," said Harry. A glance showed Voldemort's smirk gone and replaced with a frown.

"Oh?" said Cindy, interested in Voldemort's deflated smugness.

"Yes," said Harry. "The next time he had me lashed, I told him that it wasn't in the job description of being a father." Harry watched their faces turned puzzled. "And since I had manipulated him into lashing me to begin with, I took the points for winning that round."

A couple of his second years took their seats and Harry dismissed the dumbstruck students with a wave. He watched them leave and only then did he let out his laughter.

"What's so amusing, Harry?" Voldemort had returned to his chair, seen and heard only by Harry.

Harry shrugged. "It may have been a nightmare, but sharing it has become somewhat entertaining."

Voldemort laughed. "Ah, my Harry. Always the cynic."

Chapter 18

The Heirs

“So what is the first thing you would do when confronted with a Red Cap?”

Harry looked over his 2nd years. He frowned at the lack of hands in the air. Maybe in his turmoil over the curriculum of his 6th and 7th years, he had neglected the younger ones.

Harry!

Draco?

Harry could almost hear the smirk. *Who else, you moron?*

As pleased as I am to hear from you, Draco, you have rotten timing.

Too bad.

Draco. Harry tried to plead but felt a sense of urgency in the link.
Hang on.

“All right, open your books and look it up,” Harry told the students. “I want two feet by the bell.”

He hopped off his desk and sat behind it, pulling out some papers to make himself appear ‘busy.’

Harry?

Where are you, anyway?

I’m at the Tombs, but that’s-

The what?

The Tombs. The Ministry Archives.

Ah. What are you-?

Shut up and listen.

I see you're your charming self.

Draco ignored him. *What's this I heard about that thing around your neck glowing?*

Excuse me?

The Talisman.

What about it?

Harry heard a long-suffering sigh. *The 7th years said something about you giving Voldemort your magic.*

Yeah. It was pretty cool actually. Harry mentally sent Draco a shrug. *If you discount the fact that Voldemort-*

Harry! The Slytherins said the thing glowed when you did it.

Really? I didn't notice.

There was the snort. *What a surprise. Also, Snape said he saw it do it again the other day.*

Snape? When did you talk to-?

He sent me an owl, you idiot. He wanted to know when I was coming back. He said it looked like it was showing the connection.

Well that isn't so strange, considering all the connections between us.

Maybe.

Harry could tell Draco wasn't convinced.

What's your point, Draco?

Just that-

"Harry!"

Harry turned to the door where a breathless and flushed Hermione stood.

“What happened now?” said Harry.

“It’s Ginny,” gasped Hermione.

“Ginger?” Harry stood up. “What’s wrong?”

Hermione smiled. “It’s time.”

A thousand thoughts converged on Harry at once. *It’s time? Baby? Father?*

Harry, breath!

Harry took a couple of deep breaths.

Where is she?

“Where is she?” Harry asked Hermione.

“St. Mungos,” Hermione answered. “They’re not taking any chances with the Minister of Magic’s grandchildren.”

St. Mungos, good. Lot’s of doctors there. Good people. Isn’t Lockhardt there? Too many floors. How will I find her?

HARRY! Now is not the time to panic.

Panic? No. I’m not panicking. St. Mungos. There’s a telephone booth there.

Harry, breath, damn it.

Harry took another deep breath.

“Potter?”

He looked up at Hermione.

“Potter!”

He turned. "Severus? What are-"

"I will cover your class," said Snape. He gestured to Hermione. "Take him to his wife."

Right. Have to go see Ginger.

He opened his mouth but Hermione clapped a hand over it as she took his arm and led him out of the room.

"Stay with me, Harry," said Hermione.

"Have to go," said Harry. "Quickly."

"No, Harry. Come with me. Don't try to apparate," said Hermione.

Apparate. Yes.

NO!

"No?" said Harry.

"No, just come with me," said Hermione. "I'll take you."

Harry wasn't sure how they got there, but his senses started coming back as they stood in the lift. "Where's Ron?" said Harry out of the blue.

"He's going to meet us here," said Hermione.

Harry nodded. "Where's Sirius?"

Hermione studied him. "Everyone is on their way, Harry," she assured him.

He nodded again. "Where's Draco?"

"You tell me."

Draco?

I'm on my way, Harry. Just stay calm.

Harry nodded. "Calm," he said. He looked around as the lift stopped at yet another floor. "Doesn't this thing go any faster?"

"Relax," said Hermione. The doors closed.

Harry bounced on the balls of his feet. "Can't I just apparate to Ginger?"

Hermione laid a hand on his shoulder. "Harry, even *you* can't apparate here," said Hermione. "It's not keyed to the heirs like Hogwarts is."

"But--"

"Harry--"

The doors finally opened to 'Family Ailments' and Harry strode out and down what appeared to be an endless corridor. It opened to the left and the woman took one look at him and smiled.

"Through that door, Mr. Potter."

Harry followed her gesture toward a white washed door, not bothering to wonder how she knew who he was. Once inside the waiting area, he was converged upon. A handful of Weasleys, Sirius and Gwenn greeted him warmly.

Harry couldn't begin to understand how they could seem so calm. After only 5 minutes he was pacing. Even as he tried to fend off their endless distracting conversation, his focus remained on his wife.

The doctor, Harry wasn't sure of his name, came out and assured him everything was progressing normally and that Mrs. Potter was fine. He shook Harry's hand, said it was an honor to meet him, to be present at the birth. Harry wondered why he wasn't in with his wife.

"Everything will be fine, Harry," said Arthur.

"How can you be so calm?"

"Harry, please sit down."

“But-”

“Harry.”

“I should be with her,” said Harry, his determination rising.

“And do what?” said Hermione.

“I don’t know, breathe with her or something,” said Harry. “Isn’t it dangerous?”

“Harry, witches now have much safer, more comfortable methods of childbirth,” said Molly patiently. “Ginny will be fine.”

Harry mind was swimming in thought again. He could vaguely feel a burn on his forehead.

He looked at Molly. “Voldemort’s mother died in childbirth.”

“Tom Riddle was born in a Muggle hospital,” said Arthur. “His mother didn’t want her husband to know she was a witch, remember.”

A new sense of urgency overwhelmed Harry. “I have to see her,” said Harry, turning to the door.

“Harry, there’s nothing for you to do,” said Molly.

“I should be with her.”

“No,” Harry turned on them. “I’m famous Harry bloody Potter. There *has* to be something I can do.”

Voices called his name around him and three bodies suddenly blocked his path to the door.

“Get out of my way,” said Harry quietly.

A small table next to Gwenn’s chair started to shake. Calming voices that seemed foreign murmured around him. A painting fell off the wall.

“Move,” Harry told the person in front of him. He wasn’t even sure who it was. “Or so help me, I’ll hex-“

“HARRY!”

Harry spun around at the sound of a voice that for once wasn't just in his head. He barely registered Draco's fist as it connected with his jaw.

“He really should be awake for this.”

“Did you have to hit him so hard, Malfoy?”

“Oh? Did you want him to curse you into next week?”

“No, but-“

“He was about to loose it, Weasley. Better safe than sorry.”

“Well, ok but-“

“BASTARD!” Harry yelled as he jerked up from where he was sprawled out over a bed. Within moments he had Draco against the wall, his hand around his throat. “How dare you!”

“Before you strangle me, Harry,” Draco choked, “And get sent to Azkaban for murder, wouldn't you like to see your kids?”

Harry stiffened and looked around. The bed he had just vacated was in a semi-private ward. The other occupants, the Weasleys, Sirius, Gwenn and now Remus, Belle and Narcissa, all stood around the only other bed in the room.

Harry let go of Draco and he slumped against the wall.

“Ginger?” Harry croaked, stepping toward the bed.

Reclined against a mound of pillows, her red hair spilled around her and a small bundle in her arm, was his wife.

“Are you all right?”

She laughed, the most wonderful sound he'd ever heard. “Harry, you idiot. I'm fine,” said Ginny, patting the space beside her.

He took another step forward. She did indeed look fine. A closer look at the object in her arms revealed a small face with tufts of black hair wrapped up in a pink blanket.

That's one.

Beside him, in a chair next to Ginger's bed, Harry found Molly looking up at him. In her arms was a similar package wrapped in blue. Harry's legs grew weak and he sat on the bed beside Ginger between her and Molly's chair.

"Harry, this is your daughter," said Ginger.

"My daughter?" It came out sounding like a squeak but Harry couldn't dredge up any concern as his daughter was laid in his arms. She looked like a porcelain doll with thick black lashes and bowed pink lips. Only her slight squirming and fluttering eyes reminded Harry that she was real, alive – his.

My God. Is it possible to fall in love so fast?

Apparently.

Harry looked up and across the room. He forced the stupid grin on his face into a frown. "I'm still not happy with you, Malfoy."

Draco rubbed his neck, where marks from Harry's hand could be seen. "So I gathered."

Harry turned to Sirius who was laughing softly. He lifted his brows.

"Just admiring your swollen jaw and split lip," said Sirius. He chuckled again as Harry scowled. "I seem to recall your father looking the same way when I decked him before you were born."

Harry blinked at him.

Remus snorted. "It took you two punches, though Padfoot," said Remus. "Malfoy only had to hit Harry once."

Harry sent Draco a glance and finally smiled. *Your father has a nasty right jab too.*

Draco shrugged and Harry returned his attention to his squirming daughter.

"She's beautiful," he murmured, loosening the swaddling. Her arms curled up and a fist found her mouth. He reached down and ran a finger over a little fist with five perfect little fingers that opened and wound themselves around his pinky.

"Her name is Taylor," Ginger announced.

Harry looked up at his wife and blinked.

"Taylor?" Ron's outrage was obvious. "Ginny, you nitwit. What kind of name is Taylor?"

"Ron, be nice," Molly chastised.

But Ron wasn't finished. "Honestly, Harry. Why *do* you let her name things?"

"I didn't," said Ginger smugly.

Harry met her gaze and he glanced at his son, still in Molly's arms. He had told Ginger she could name them. His only stipulations were that neither of them were to be named after him or anyone else. He wanted his children to have their own identities. Being a Potter was going to be hard enough. But Ginger had her own sentimentality and her own cunning, as she proved when she had arranged for him to take his Acknowledged Master test.

With a sigh, he handed Taylor back to Ginger and reached out and took his son from his mother-in-law. He stroked a finger down his almost identical perfect cheek.

"My son," he whispered.

"Oh I get it," said Ron as he leaned over Harry to peer down at the infant. "His name must be Jack then."

Draco snorted. "Oh you're quick, aren't you?"

Draco, you do realize that almost everyone in this room is a Weasley.

Harry sent that thought to Draco before he looked up at Ron. "Your sister has her own brand of manipulation," said Harry. He turned back to his wife. "Despite the fact that I didn't want them named after me."

Ginger merely smiled at him. Of course she could have named them after Voldemort himself and Harry wouldn't have minded at that moment, which Ginger probably knew. He was just so happy that his family was healthy.

"Won't that about kill your anonymity at Raven's Retreat?" said Draco.

"I doubt it," said Harry, his eyes back on his son. "Ginger and Lu-"
"Ginger poked him. "My caretaker do all the business in the community. No one there has ever even seen Jack Taylor."

"Well I still say it's not very original," Ron grumbled.

"Yes well, Ging is being sentimental," said Harry. "It's a more original reason than the way I got it."

"Just how did you come up with it?" said Hermione, distracted by Taylor who she had finally gotten away from Gwenn.

Harry shrugged, pushing Ron's hands away from his son for the umpteenth time. "When the lady at the optometrist office asked me my name, I had to think fast."

Draco's snort was loud in his head. *You aren't about to demonstrate how pathetic you can be, are you?*

Harry looked up then around until he spotted Draco hovering over Hermione. He met his gaze and laughed – had too. "Yeah, it was rather pathetic," Harry admitted. "There was a dry cleaners across the street with a neon sign that said Jack's Tayloring and well..."

Draco snorted out loud that time. "Figures," he muttered, reaching for Taylor.

Hermione slapped his hand away. "Go away, Malfoy."

"Give her here," said Draco in an imperious voice. "She's my goddaughter."

"Says who?" snapped Hermione.

Their argument went on and Harry finally surrendered his son to Ron. He leaned over his wife and kissed her gently.

"All ready they're being fought over," whispered Harry.

Ginny smiled sheepishly. "You'll get used to it."

"Have I told you how beautiful you are?"

Ginger bit her lip, her cheeks glowing. "I'm a mess."

Harry shook his head. "You are stunning," Harry insisted. "I wouldn't trade this moment for anything. Thank you."

"I love you, Harry," said Ginny then she grinned, "But if you touch me again with that look in your eye, I'll hex you."

Harry laughed but turned to Molly, who was watching them with a bemused smile. "She's kidding, right?"

"So what do you think?" said Harry.

"What do I think about what?" said Ginger.

Harry looked up from watching Taylor sleep in his arms and shook his head. He was sitting comfortably in the chair next to Ginger's bed and Ginger was still comfortably propped up against pillows.

They were *almost* alone.

People had been in and out most of the evening. Harry put up with the lot of them, teachers, staff, reporters and photographers, especially the latter ones, with his utmost perseverance. The nurse had shooed everyone out and had given Harry one hour to stay with

Ginger, who despite one short nap, still looked exhausted. Now, they were enjoying the time together – alone – or virtually so.

Ginger frowned at him, realizing that he hadn't been addressing her. "How long has he been here?" she said fatigue probably making her sound more irritated than she was.

Harry shrugged, watching his fingers run through Taylor's hair, as black as his own, and around her flawless little ear. He couldn't seem to get enough of touching them.

"A couple of hours," said Harry. "At least from what I've felt."

He wasn't surprised by the chuckle. "I followed you out of the classroom, Harry," said Voldemort from somewhere near the door. He hadn't materialized. "Did you think I would miss this?"

Harry looked up as he felt Voldemort approached. "So answer my question."

"What would you like to hear, Harry? That they are exactly what I expected? That they will grow to be extraordinary? That she," he gaze dropped to Harry lap, "Will make the perfect Slytherin Heir?"

"How do you know its her?" said Ginger crossly.

Voldemort turned to her. "Oh, I know, my dear," said Voldemort. "I know it all."

Ginger let out a frustrated sound. "Is there something about being dead that allows you to know these things?"

"Of course," said Voldemort as if any idiot would know that. "The truth transcends all boundaries, even those perceived to be set by death."

Harry scowled. Even hidden in Voldemort's semantics, those words sounded damned familiar.

Voldemort reached down to run his knuckles down Taylor's face. Harry had an urge to pull her away until he remembered that

Voldemort could only touch him. But the ghostly fingers drifted over the pale skin not through it and the baby's head turned into the touch.

Harry jerked his eyes to Voldemort's and locked his gaze. Terror gripped him.

No!

Voldemort smiled serenely. "I can only touch her because you are, Harry," said Voldemort. "Right now, she is an extension of you – just as when you hold my wand and allow me to use it."

Relief flooded through him. These emotional ups and downs were getting to him today.

"I hate it when you do that," muttered Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. "I've told you, Harry. I know you. Your every expression is a reflection of my own."

"Harry!" Harry looked up his wife's alarmed cry. "Why is the baby's foot glowing?"

He looked down and saw the glow at the bottom of the blanket. Shifting the baby, he noticed that it wasn't the baby but his medallion under his shirt that shone. Voldemort eased away from him, letting his hand fall away from the baby and the glow faded. Harry looked up at him.

"It's our connection, Harry," Voldemort explained. "And now hers. The talisman knows the heirs."

Harry smirked at him, knowing ironically because of said talisman, that Voldemort wasn't being completely honest. However, Harry was too tired for one of Voldemort's brain numbing lectures.

Fortunately, the nurse came in, with what appeared to be support staff in case Harry had a problem with them taking the babies back to the nursery. Harry said a reluctant goodbye to Ginger, promising to return as soon as he could.

The nurse assured Harry that Mrs. Potter needed to rest and she would be fine and shooed him out.

“Congratulations, Harry,” said Voldemort and they exited the hospital.

“Thank you,” said Harry. “Although Ginger did all the work.”

“Indeed. But your work is only just starting now. Are you ready?”

Harry apparated to his classroom. Voldemort was right behind him.

“I don’t have much of a choice at this point,” said Harry moving through to his office. He was suddenly very tired.

“Perhaps,” said Voldemort vaguely as he stopped at the door to Harry’s private rooms. Rowan squawked from within with what sounded to Harry like a warning.

“Seems to be the story of my life,” said Harry still smiling.

“Always the cynic, my Harry.”

Harry was too happy to care.

Chapter 19

Patrimony

Harry's first class the next day were his 3rd year Slytherins. He endured the initial barrage of questions.

"What are their names?"

"Jack Arthur and Taylor Lily."

"Who is older?"

"Jack is 2 ½ minutes older."

"Who do they look like?"

"I'm told they look like me although I think it's too soon to tell."

"So who's the heir?" someone was brave enough to ask.

"Well," Harry told them, "Voldemort claimed that Taylor was the Slytherin heir." He paused to smirk. "He claims knowledge due to the fact that he's dead."

Harry heard the chuckle from across the room but didn't acknowledge it. Voldemort wasn't supposed to be in this class but Harry was feeling too mellow to point out technicalities.

"And," Harry went on, "Several other members of Slytherin House also agreed."

"Who?"

"Well Mr. Malfoy for one," said Harry. "But he's also her Godfather so I think he's biased. Professor Snape also concurred but I think that was because Mr. and Professor Weasley are Jack's godparents and Snape would abhor the implication of Jack being the heir of Slytherin under those conditions."

Several students snorted their agreement.

Things progressed in a similar fashion that day. Harry received owls at least twice during every class. The best was one from Colin who Harry learned from the note worked at the Daily Prophet and had 'managed' to confiscate several pictures taken at St. Mungo's and promptly sent them to Harry.

Those pictures had made the rounds at school and Harry was told that the headmaster had deemed it acceptable if none of his classes got any work done that day. While Harry didn't think this was particularly fair, he also noticed it was beyond his control anyway as his students were almost as excited as he was to talk about the babies.

Of course they could've been just taking advantage of him so they didn't have to do any work, but again, Harry was beyond caring. Happiness surrounded him at every turn and he was determined to cling to it.

Such was the mood of the entire castle that Harry was more than a little surprised when he walked into the fencing classroom late that afternoon.

Draco had nagged him to spar for a while before going back to the hospital that night. Draco insisted it would relax him. Harry wasn't feeling the slightest bit tense, but he could see the benefits of expending some built up energy before going to see Ginger and the twins.

What surprised him was the gathering of students – and not all of them *fencing* students – in fact, they were *Harry's* students crowded around Draco within the room. But not only their presence but also the seriousness of their demeanors.

Harry, who had learned the art of eavesdropping all too well in his youth out of necessity, crept soundlessly closer.

"I'm telling you it won't work without proof." Draco looked frustrated. Harry knew the feeling. Draco should know better than to argue with teenaged Gryffindors.

"But if he knows there's a danger–"

“There’s no proof,” Draco cut Cindy off. “And you’ve seen him. He down-plays everything.”

“How can we get proof if we can’t test it?”

“Oh, Harry. Don’t skulk.”

Harry nearly jumped out of his skin. Damn Voldemort’s timing.

The group also startled and turned to where Harry stood.

“Ah, hi, Professor Potter,” said Sean.

“What’s going on?” said Harry. He eyed Draco who was watching Voldemort with a masked look. *Draco?*

We need to talk.

About what?

“Harry, aren’t you going to fence?” said Voldemort. Harry looked over at him. “I’d rather enjoy an exhibition of your respective talents.”

Draco?

Later.

“Harry?”

Harry slid out of his robe. “Yes, we’re going to fence,” said Harry. A glance around showed the kids all finding places to sit. Apparently they were staying to watch.

Cindy looked like she was trying to talk to Sean but he kept shush her. Harry was surprised again when Dante walked in with Adair Darcy. While Adair was in the fencing class, he was surprised to see the Slytherins here now.

Dante was looking at Sean with a questioning look, but Sean quickly shook his head. Dante’s expression changed as he turned to Draco.

“A private show, Mr. Malfoy?” said Dante.

“Professor Potter’s skill would fall into decay without a Malfoy to practice with,” said Draco. They continued with some mindless Slytherin drivel, dragging Gryffindor and Harry in general through the mud.

Harry rolled his eyes in Sean’s direction and held up his sword.

“Sometime tonight, Malfoy,” said Harry. “I’d like to see my kids this millennium.”

Draco just smirked as he summoned his sword off the wall.

As usual, as soon as he faced Draco across the floor, all thoughts melted away. The sword felt like part of his arm again as he sparred and dueled with Draco. Their audience was silent as they moved up and down the confines of the fencing room floor. Even Voldemort had nothing to say so the duration was rigorous but relaxing.

After about 45 minutes, they called a stop and Harry summoned them each a towel. The students showed their appreciation for the match but didn’t linger. Harry wondered if Voldemort had anything to do with it. He was acting particularly intrusive.

“Are you coming to the Hospital tonight?” Harry asked Draco, hanging up his sword. Sennie coiled up his arm to a familiar resting place.

“No, I have plans.”

“Ok, I’ll see you later then.”

Harry, we need to talk when you get back.

All right. I’ll call as soon as I get back. I promise.

“Harry, you should get going,” said Voldemort.

Yup, intrusive.

“And I’m sure your young wife would like to see you.”

Then again, Voldemort was usually right anyway. Harry rushed off to have a shower then see his family.

When Harry got to the hospital, he was surprised again. This time at the flurry of activity around the outside of his wife's room. Sirius was pacing, no stalking, around the corridor while Gwenn and Remus tried to calm him down. Minerva McGonagall was also waiting, and she appeared in a pique herself.

A very large orderly was standing in front of the door, arms crossed.

Instantly alarmed, Harry approached. "What's wrong?"

"Harry," Sirius spun with a sound of relief. "Go in there and tell that—"

"Mr. Black," Minerva chastised severely.

Sirius sent her a withering look. "Well, you're not too pleased either. You've been waiting 20 minutes—"

"What's going on?" said Harry, now aware that nothing was actually wrong. There were probably people in with Ginny and there were only two visitors (aside for the father in the maternity wing) allowed into a room at a time during normal visiting hours.

Remus looked at Harry with a knowing grin. "Severus and Draco are in with Ginny right now and Sirius is none to pleased."

"Bloody Slytherins," muttered Sirius. "They've been in there for half an hour."

"Now Sirius be fair," said Gwenn. "We got to see the babies for a long time this afternoon."

Harry opened his mouth to tell them that it was impossible because he had just left Draco at school, but quickly changed his mind.

"I'll see what I can do," said Harry.

The orderly stepped aside so Harry could enter. Once the door closed behind him, he took in the room with a glance. His wife was in a chair by a window, a piece of parchment and ink before her on a small round table. She was writing steadily but stopped as Harry stepped in.

The 'bloody Slytherins' were standing by the bassinets and looking, before Harry's presence was noted, as if they wanted to reach in and pick up a baby but were at a loss as to the correct procedure.

Harry temporarily ignored them in favor of Ginny. He leaned over her and kissed her briefly.

"What are you writing?" said Harry.

She shrugged. "Baby stuff."

Harry noticed a list including things like nappies and onsies and other such paraphernalia with names and definitions that eluded him so he simply smiled. Something else he hoped he wouldn't have to worry about.

He turned to the other men in the room. "What's the matter?" Harry asked them. "Afraid?"

Snape snorted and crossed his arms. "Don't be absurd, Potter. We merely don't wish to be responsible for any undue stress for your wife if one of the little whelps were to wake up."

Harry sent Ginger a knowing glance. "As I thought." Without hesitation, Harry moved over to the bassinets. After seeing one move, he reached in and picked up Jack. Harry had gotten adequate practice the night before in maneuvering the babies, so he was satisfied when Jack settled comfortably in his arm without a sound.

"I'm impressed, Potter," said 'Draco.'

"Oh stop," said Ginger, looking up from her notes. "You were perfectly at ease with Taylor last night, Draco."

Harry looked at Ginger with surprise then sent a curious look to 'Draco' and Severus. He lifted his brows. "You didn't tell her?"

"Tell me what?"

"The privacy in this place isn't exactly conducive for candor," said Severus.

Harry sighed. "I cast a sequestration spell on this room myself yesterday," said Harry. "Did you think I wanted everyone to know that Voldemort's ghost was wondering around the halls?"

"Tell me what?" echoed Ginger, a little more annoyed.

"The anti-aparation wards may keep me from aparating but anyone could cast a concealment spell over the room," Harry added. "Even you."

The two men looked almost embarrassed.

"Harry!" snapped Ginger.

Looking over finally, Harry smiled. "Sorry, Ging," said Harry. "Couldn't help teasing two of Voldemort's most powerful Death Eaters."

"Well all right, but-" Ginger stopped and looked at the two again. "Oh that's not - oh-" a look of dawning crossed her face. She looked at 'Draco' again and smiled. "I'm glad you could come and see the babies, Lucius."

Lucius explained that he had received an owl with the news and a flask of polyjuice with instructions on when and where to surface so he could accompany Severus to St. Mungo's.

They visited for a bit longer then Harry suggested they leave and allow others in to visit with Ginger and the babies.

"Yes, we should leave before the mangy mongrel outside has puppies," said Severus as he opened the door. Harry was sure it was deliberate. "As appropriate as the location is, I think this ward draws the line at catering to furballs."

Harry heard a growl then a well-timed, calming voice warn, "Sirius."

"Just slither out of the way, Snape, so I can see my godson and his family," snarled Sirius.

"Clever retort, Black," said Severus. "As sharp as always."

Remus all but shoved Sirius into the room as the others left.

Harry returned to the castle sometime around 11:00 pm. They had kicked him out of the Hospital around 10 and he went to have a bite to eat in Hogsmeade. He met up with Severus and Lucius, who was loath to drop his disguise as it allowed him to be out in public in England without fear, in The Three Broomsticks.

They joked about how long Draco would last held captive at Hogwarts while his father pretended to be him. Lucius was happy however to enjoy his day of freedom and return to Bulgaria with little complaint.

Harry was about to call Draco as he entered the castle but Voldemort stopped him. He materialized in the foyer inside the flinch zone.

"Sorry, Harry," said Voldemort as he drifted away.

Harry couldn't help but laugh as he dragged himself to his feet. "I hate it when you do that," muttered Harry. He looked up at Voldemort. "So, where have you been?"

"Pardon?"

"I was surprised I didn't see you at the hospital." Harry began the trek to his rooms, Voldemort floating beside him. "Lucius was there."

"Hm. Yes, I know."

Harry sent him a glance. "Really?" said Harry. "So you were there?"

"Briefly," said Voldemort.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't wish to intrude."

"You?" said Harry. "Since when?"

"As surprising at it may seem," said Voldemort, "I just wasn't comfortable."

“Why?” said Harry curiously. “There wasn’t anyone there you didn’t know.”

“Yes, you finally have your family surrounding you.”

He almost sounded jealous. “Severus, Lucius and Draco are your family too.”

“Yes, but I am nothing more than an irritation to them now. They show me respect for no other reason but to keep me from hurting you. I am a reminder of their past.”

Harry closed the door of his classroom and turned to look at the sullen apparition of his nemesis/teacher/father. “Who are you and what have you done to Voldemort?”

Voldemort forced a smile. “Harry, it’s true. My time is coming to an end I fear. I daresay, Miss Grang – Professor Weasley will find some way to banish me.”

“But I thought-“

“But there is one more thing I’d like to teach you,” said Voldemort. “If you will let me.”

Harry eyed him skeptically. Voldemort’s defeated attitude, his morose depression all struck Harry as odd. Then he recalled how intrusive he had been before. He wondered if he should call Draco.

“Are you worried, Harry?” said Voldemort. “You doubt me. So go ahead. Use the Talisman. You know it is functional. It works because I gave it to you – it was a gift. And I cared.”

He pulled the medallion out from under his shirt and wrapped his hand around it. Something wasn’t right. “Tell me, Voldemort,” said Harry. “Tell me the truth. What’s really bothering you?”

Voldemort drifted closer to Harry and sighed dramatically. “Very well. You know how possessive I am.” Voldemort’s hand reached out and his fingers traced a path down Harry’s cheek. “I simply can’t bear watching you with all those people.”

That certainly sounded more accurate.

"I can't punish them without hurting you. You know it distresses me to see you in pain," Voldemort continued, watching Harry endure the pain from his touch. "In fact, if it were in my power, I would find a way to keep you safe and protected for all eternity."

"That's a bit much, don't you think," choked Harry.

Voldemort released his face and moved away. "You know how it feels now, Harry. You are a father."

Harry leaned against his desk and thought for a minute. Damn, he *did* know how it felt.

"And that's what I want to teach you," said Voldemort, pride invading his demeanor as well as his voice. "The protection spell for the Talisman so you can pass it along."

"The patron charm?" said Harry.

"Yes."

Harry smirked. "I already know the patron charm."

Voldemort smiled patiently. "This is a specialized version of it, Harry. Do you think Salazar Slytherin would use your average patron charm on *his* Talisman?" Harry had the grace to color with embarrassment. "This one will insure that the Talisman will work for your heirs."

"Surely, we have plenty of time for that."

"Oh do humor me, Harry," said Voldemort. "I'd like to feel somewhat involved in all your happiness. After all, they are my grandchildren, even if everyone else claims a closer bond."

Harry snorted at Voldemort's choice of words. Grandfather Voldemort.

"I'd like to feel I've given them something."

"You did," said Harry seriously. "You wanted me to live. Without your noble gesture, I'd be dead as well and they wouldn't even exist."

“There you are then. Call it a belated thank you. I will teach you the charm and you will be honoring me with the temporary gift of your power.”

“So that’s it,” said Harry with realization. “You just want me to give you my power.”

“With very good reason.”

“Why didn’t you just ask?” said Harry. “Why go through the whole ‘poor dead dark lord’ routine?”

Voldemort blinked at him. “You think I’ve been deceiving you?” Voldemort’s features flashed anger but quickly melted into hurt. “I thought I taught you better,” murmured Voldemort. “I thought you knew me.”

Without another word, he was gone.

Harry looked around. What the hell?

“Voldemort, I’m sorry,” said Harry, turning a full circle. “All right, I’ll do it. But-“

Voldemort instantly materialized. Harry hit his knees.

“Yes, yes,” said Voldemort. “I promise, no tricks.”

Harry hauled himself to his feet yet again. He shook his head. “I walked right into that one.”

Voldemort chuckled. “I do know you so well.”

“Yes, well as proficient as your manipulation techniques are, if we-“

“If? You said that you would,” Voldemort pointed out.

Harry sighed. “Ok *when* we do this-“

“Yes, yes. I will release you on my own.”

Harry frowned. “I guess we could ask Hermione in the morning.”

Voldemort looked crestfallen. "Well I suppose," said Voldemort. "It wouldn't be quite the same. I was looking forward to-"

"I could call Draco and-"

"Draco is not my son," said Voldemort, his expression harsh and serious. "If you would prefer that Lucius-"

"Forget it. I'm sorry. We'll do it now, ok. Stop with the guilt."

There was the chuckle. "Sorry, Harry."

Harry grumbled under his breath but dug out Voldemort's wand from his desk.

"Relax, Harry. It will be fun."

Harry was suddenly reminded of the 'demonstration' for the Death Eaters when he was 17. That had been more 'weird' than anything else.

He moved to the clear space between his desk and the first row of desks. "How will I know-"

"I will explain as we go along," said Voldemort.

"Of course," said Harry, closing his eyes and clearing his mind. He felt Voldemort move up behind him. Damn, Voldemort was impatient tonight.

Concentrating on his internal magic, he felt Voldemort grip the hand that was holding his wand. Harry relaxed and felt the charge flow through him again.

"Go on, Harry," said Voldemort sounding breathless.

"Apporton," said Harry.

The magic shifted and began its dance through him, around him. This time it felt slightly different. Voldemort didn't do anything with the magic at first. He merely accepted it. It coursed between them as if they were one conduit for it.

“So what’s the spell?” said Harry.

Voldemort’s other arm came around him and he picked the Talisman up off his chest. Harry opened his eyes to peer down at it. The eyes, one red, one green, were glowing especially bright.

“I gave you this gift for many reasons,” said Voldemort. “One because it was another brand for you to wear. Like your scar, it marks you as mine. Another because I wanted you to know, to be sure, that I would never – could never deceive you. But mostly because I knew you would like it, favor it. It was one thing that was mine, that I knew you would accept without the usual - negotiation.”

Harry swallowed. It was true. He had resisted accepting Voldemort’s company, his protection, his fortune and his patrimony but he had accepted the medallion without question.

But what did all that have to do with the spell?

“I told you the absolute truth before, Harry,” said Voldemort, releasing the medallion.

It fell to Harry’s chest solidly but Harry was more concerned with Voldemort’s free hand, which lifted to Harry’s face.

“I can not bear others intruding into your life. And now I will stop them.”

Voldemort moved around to face Harry, a grip still tight around his fist, his other hand returned to Harry’s face.

Voldemort’s expression was determined and intense. A feeling of déjà vu overcame him. Harry opened his mouth to call Rowan.

A grip around his jaw silenced him but not from pain. Intense red eyes locked on his own.

“I will protect you from everything and everyone for eternity,” said Voldemort. “The prophecy is complete again, but this time – I win.”

Harry then heard the hiss of parseltongue in his ear. *“Truth is timeless. Death is a deception.”*

Voldemort’s hand moved up his face. Harry only vaguely wondered why he wasn’t in agony. The fingers pressed to Harry’s scar.

“Apperton,” said Voldemort.

The world went instantly black.

Chapter 20

The Dark Lord Returns

Lord Voldemort slowly began to move. He flexed his hands, moving them to touch his chest, his face his hair. With a deep breath, he filled his lungs and exhaled with a laugh of delight.

A glance around showed him alone in the DADA classroom. He stooped and picked up his wand, caressing it with a tender touch. He also retrieved the medallion, which also lay at his feet. His hand passed through a cold spot as he did. A chuckle escaped him.

"My poor Harry," murmured Voldemort. "This is sure to set off that temper of yours." He stared at the empty spot on the floor as he laid the chain around his neck.

"Profess-"

"*Crucio.*"

Lord Voldemort's reflexes were slow yet but his aim was true.

"Oh dear," said Voldemort as he lifted the curse. Laughing quietly, he moved to stand over the 3 young Gryffindors lying on the floor just inside the door.

Cindy Larsen was curled in a fetal position whimpering. Sean McIves was breathing deeply, tears trailing down his cheeks. Miss Cooper was unconscious. Voldemort waited patiently as the three recovered.

"Where's Professor Potter?" Sean managed as he pushed himself to a seat on the floor.

"Oh, he's here," said Voldemort, gesturing flippantly as he paced away. "Don't you feel his *presence*?" Voldemort had to admire the look of terror on Miss Larsen's expression as Sean helped her sit up.

"You did it?" said Cindy breathlessly. "Didn't you?"

"Indeed," said Voldemort. "How could I not?"

Sean and Cindy helped Missy as she returned to consciousness and the three of them stood up. Voldemort waved them into the room.

"My brilliant but oh so naive son has finally given me all I desire," said Voldemort as the three cautiously entered the classroom. "Not only am I restored with all my powers and his, but he is completely under my control."

"Where is he?" said Sean although it came out more like a croak.

"I dare say, his mind has not regained consciousness."

"The amulet," Cindy gasped, staring at Voldemort's chest where the medallion sat.

"Indeed," said Voldemort. "Thanks to you, Miss Larsen, I began to speculate several of its properties. The most important being our connection, which began when Harry was but a year old."

"The curse that failed."

"Yes, Miss Cooper."

"Put Professor Potter's mother-"

Voldemort cut Sean off. "Yes, Lily Potter's love *did* save Harry and rebound the curse onto myself. But what saved me?" quizzed Voldemort.

Cindy gasped. "The Amulet," she said. "You were wearing it that day."

"I was," said Voldemort. "It additionally helped keep my spirit alive, even in the realm in which I dwelt. While both of these facts have pertinence in the life and death connection between Harry and I, only combined with other factors could I actually make use of the Amulet's more," he paused to grin, "unearthly facets."

"As Miss Larsen reported, the Amulet responds to intent. It feeds off strong emotion, transforming it into ancient powerful magic."

Cindy gasped again. "My God, Professor Potter was wearing it the day he killed you in the Chamber of Secrets."

Voldemort chuckled. "Miss Larsen, you are indeed astute. Yes, he was," said Voldemort.

"But wouldn't that mean that there was love—"

Voldemort chuckled again. "My dear Miss Cooper," said Voldemort. "Does that surprise you? He was — is — my son. Given the choice, I chose to die for him. I wanted him to live. While I didn't know at the time, it actually re-forged the connection between us with the Amulet."

"And all this term, all the re-hashing of the events in your past, just made Professor remember all the old feelings," said Cindy sadly.

"You made him care again," said Missy.

"Indeed."

"And you convinced him into giving you the power again," said Sean.

"Yes, Harry's never been able to handle guilt," said Voldemort fondly. "Harry's been manipulated for the last time."

"But why would you do that?" sniffed Missy. "If *you* care."

"It's more than a matter of caring, Miss Cooper," said Voldemort. "Harry has always been too noble, too self-sacrificing. Now, having total control over him, I can truly protect him. Even from himself."

"Sounds more like obsession," muttered Sean.

Voldemort let out an actual laugh. "There is that," said Voldemort. "But what you have to understand, Mr. McIves, is that Harry became mine at a year old even if it wasn't by choice. At 17, he chose to join me. Now, I have made the choice. He has made his last sacrifice."

"To you," said Cindy.

"Precisely," said Voldemort. "I believe he owes me. He will deal with it," he added simply.

"I think it's just going to royally piss him off," said Sean.

"Very likely," said Voldemort with a chuckle. "Very likely."

"We were too late," moaned Missy.

Reminded, Sean's head snapped up. "You knew," Sean accused. "You knew we were going to warn him."

"Of course," said Voldemort. "I suspected Mr. Malfoy had finally figured it out. Had he been closer to Miss Granger, I'm sure they would have taken the medallion off of him weeks ago, but they are unused to conferring together."

"But we—"

"Yes. Once you three figured out that the Talisman was the Amulet, I had to move quickly," said Voldemort. "I deliberately kept Harry from private conversation with anyone until I could get him alone."

"But Professor Potter and Mr. Malfoy are telepathically connected," said Cindy.

"Yes that was more difficult," said Voldemort. "Keeping their conversation aloud. Fortunately, Harry was distracted with the birth of his children and Mr. Malfoy was concerned that I might punish Harry to keep them from speaking."

"Would you have?" asked Sean.

"Maybe," said Voldemort then he waved his hand. "It is a moot point now anyway." He chuckled. "Don't you agree?"

"What exactly *did* you do?" said Missy. "I mean how did you make it work?"

"The spell I used is a very old sharing spell that, quite simply, merged our magic," Voldemort told them.

"Aporton," said Cindy. "The one the Professor uses to give you his magic."

“Yes.”

“But that alone couldn’t have activated the Amulet,” said Sean.

“Oh no,” said Voldemort. “That was everything combined. Once all the requirements were met, I simply asked the amulet for life.” Voldemort chuckled. “So to speak.”

“Asked it?” said Sean bewildered. “How?”

“How indeed,” said Voldemort. Did they think he was going to tell them everything? They would learn. Yes, they would suit his needs very well now that he was back. And of course he would need to call those Death Eaters that remained true to him.

“So what will you do now?” said Cindy.

“Now?” said Voldemort, returning his attention to the three Gryffindors. “Now, I will fulfill my destiny.” He moved toward the door. “With my son at my side. You will see. Come,” he bade them.

The three stood hesitantly.

“Oh do try me, Mr. McIves,” said Voldemort with a glance at them, his gaze on Sean’s wand, which the boy had drawn. A true noble Gryffindor action, one that any Slytherin would have known was coming. “Do you presume you could take me on? You have only felt a fraction of Cruciatus. You may have courage and talent, but Harry Potter you are not.”

He turned back to the door. “Come. All of you. You will have a place in the new order. My order.”

Harry woke up and took a deep breath. No pain. He touched his chest, his arms, his face. Everything seemed all right. No weirdo memories like when he was 17 and Voldemort tried his other options. He still felt a bit strange though.

He pushed himself up off the floor of his classroom and was surprised when it didn’t spin. But when he went to take a step, he found that his feet seemed rooted to the floor.

“What the-“

The door burst open, Draco, looking angry, stalked in with Hermione, looking confused, in tow. Draco looked around the room.

“Harry!” he shouted, unnecessarily as Harry was standing not ten feet away.

“I don’t understand, Draco,” Hermione was saying.

Draco looked around the room again. “Blast,” he muttered and turned back to Hermione. “Look, we’ve got to find Harry first,” said Draco. “Then I’ll explain it again.”

“What’s going on?” said Harry.

“But-“

“Granger,” snapped Draco. “Let’s just get the damn thing off Harry, before Voldemort figures out what it is.”

“Draco, what are you talking about?” said Harry again, instinctively putting his hand to the medallion. Only then did he notice it was gone.

Draco and Hermione turned to leave.

“DRACO!” Harry shouted. They didn’t stop. Why couldn’t they hear him?

“But it can’t be,” insisted Hermione.

“Weren’t you paying attention,” raged Draco. “The Talisman *is* the Amulet of Quetzacoatl. If we don’t get it off Harry before Voldemort figures out how to use it, then he can possess Harry or merge with him or-“

“Switch places with him,” finished Hermione with sudden dawning.

That ever-present trapdoor seemed to open under Harry again as he realized what Voldemort had done.

“My life is a nightmare,” murmured Harry. *DRACO!*

“What?” Draco stopped and looked around.

“Draco?”

Draco moved back into the room and raised his hand to quiet Hermione.

Harry?

Yes, damn it. What’s going on?

“I hear him,” Draco told Hermione. *Where are you?*

I’m standing ten feet away from you.

What?

You’re too late.

“What?” said Hermione impatiently. “What is it?”

“Shh,” said Draco. *What do you mean?*

It means, I’m standing ten feet away from you and I think – I think, I’m a ghost.

Draco stepped further into the room, looking around. He was almost right beside Harry now.

You’re here?

Yes.

“Harry says he’s here,” said Draco. “Can you hear us?”

Yes, but you can’t hear me when I speak.

“Well just pop in or materialize or whatever ghosts do,” said Draco.

I can’t.

“What do you mean, you can’t,” said Draco frustrated now.

I can't even move.

"What?" Draco stretched out his hand. It touched Harry's arm and Draco jerked it back. "Is that you?"

Yes.

"Hermione, stop sniffing and help, damn it," said Draco with a glance at her. "Why can't you move?"

I don't know how.

"You don't know how?" said Draco. His fist clenched tightly around his wand now. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Draco," Hermione cut him off, speaking finally. She reached out towards where Harry stood and she also pulled her hand back.

What is the matter?

Sorry, Harry. It's just that, well, you're a cold spot of air right now.

Great.

"It makes sense," said Hermione. "Harry didn't actually die. How should he know how to do things as a ghost? Maybe there's some sort of mental process or something."

"Well haven't you read anything on the subject?" said Draco impatiently. "I thought you knew all about ghosts now since Voldemort got here."

Draco was pacing now too. *Lay off, Draco.*

"I'm sorry," Draco snapped. He was clearly frantic and angry. "It's just that we, I mean, when did it happen?"

Harry glanced at his watch. It was flashing at 12:00. He looked at Draco.

What time is it now?

"It's 7 a.m.," said Draco.

I think it must have happened at midnight. My watch is stopped there.

Harry lifted a hand automatically. "Commentary."

Nothing.

"What should I be doing?"

Nothing.

His brain locked in comprehension.

Oh, God.

"What is it?"

Harry felt his knees go weak and he slowly sank to the spot on the floor.

It's gone.

"Harry, what's wrong?" said Draco concerned.

Harry?

My magic. It's gone. Th-there's nothing left.

"Oh this is bad." Draco turned to Hermione. "Harry says his magic is gone too. We've got to do something."

Hermione looked like her brain was finally moving again. "I'll go get one of the ghosts. They'll know something."

Hermione rushed out of the room.

"Harry?"

He's finally destroyed me, Draco.

Harry, don't talk like that. We'll figure something out. What happened anyway?

When I got back from the hospital, he was all depressed, Harry told him. He said he wanted to teach me a spell to make the Talisman work for the babies. I gave him the use of his wand and-

Harry, you gave him your powers?

Why did Draco always make him feel like an idiot. Well, yeah. He sort of laid on the guilt and-

Harry, after all this time, haven't you learned-

I'm sorry, Harry practically yelled. I forgot.

Forgot? You FORGOT! Draco did yell. Harry, if you were corporeal I'd hex you for such idiocy - or deck you again.

Well I'm not corporeal, am I, Harry shot back, his ire clear. I'm a bloody ghost. Once again, I'm the one who has to deal-

Pain exploded in Harry's scar and his hand hit his head. A familiar tug behind his navel pulled Harry into a vortex and he hit the floor solidly. A glance around showed him in the Great Hall, in front of the staff table, on his knees, at Voldemort's feet.

Harry looked up. Voldemort was there, in the flesh, just as he looked when Harry had plunged Godric's sword through his heart. His tall form still thin, his long black hair streaked with gray, his face pale and moderately lined with age. And the red eyes glowed with pleasure.

"What have you done?" whispered Harry.

Voldemort looked down at him and smiled. Harry had only seen that particular smile once. When Harry had accepted him, joined him. He had smiled like that and laughed as if all his dreams had finally come true.

"Hello, Harry," said Voldemort.

Apparently, Voldemort could see and hear him.

"You have truly pleased me, my son," said Voldemort. "You have given me everything I wanted and more."

"Voldemort."

They both turned to the staff table. All the teachers and Dumbledore, who had spoken, were standing behind it, wands raised.

"Think carefully before you strike Albus," said Voldemort. "If you kill me, Harry goes with me."

"Harry, are you all right?" said Dumbledore kindly.

Harry blinked at him. Apparently they could see him too. He wondered if it was because Voldemort had called him. This ghost thing was totally beyond him.

"Am I all right?" said Harry, his temper building in a way it hadn't in a long time. He pushed himself to his feet again. "I'm a bloody ghost and I didn't even die. I have no magic and—"

Voldemort's hand gripped his face, silencing him.

"Harry, now is not the time," said Voldemort. He let go and Harry dropped back to the floor.

"As you can see," Voldemort told the staff. "The connection is still fully in effect."

Draco and Hermione came skidding to a halt just inside the hall.

"Ah, very good," said Voldemort. "Come here, Draco, my boy."

Draco slowly moved towards Harry and Voldemort.

Voldemort took hold of Draco's arm and looked back at Dumbledore.

"This time I will do things my way. The prophecy is fulfilled. The heirs are united and the treasure is sacrificed, but I win, Albus," said Voldemort with relish. "I have all the power and I get to keep Harry."

He glanced along the table and his eyes stopped at Snape. "Oh, and since I can control him now, I don't need you anymore. I'm sorry, Severus. Avada Kedavra!"

A flash of green light split the room. Severus Snape fell to the floor. Voldemort and Draco were gone.

Harry stared in horror at the scene.

All the teachers converged on Snape's body as Hermione screamed and ran towards Harry, who was still on his knees.

This is all my fault.

"Harry, are you all-"

Pain exploded in his head again as Voldemort signaled. The tug behind his navel pulled and he was ripped out of the Great Hall.

Chapter 21

Reign of the Dark Lord

Harry landed again at Voldemort's feet. A glance around showed them back at – well back at the compound. Harry blinked. Everything was almost identical to the way it had been. The line of tents for the inner circle of Voldemort's supporters lined one side of the camp, with his own on the end. The fire, encircled by the oversized wing-backed chairs, blazed across the small clearing. Even the fencing tent was re-constructed.

There was activity everywhere. It seemed that every death eater that had escaped Azkaban or alluded the dementors kiss was back in the Dark Lord's service.

"Come along, Harry," said Voldemort before Harry could get a more detailed view. He moved towards what had always been Voldemort's tent and Harry was more or less dragged with him.

They emerged into Voldemort's private domain (the office within appearing the same as Harry remembered) and were met by several surprised reactions.

"So it's true."

"This is terrible."

"Oh, Professor."

Harry could barely tolerate his students' comments on his new humiliation. He vaguely thanked God that Draco wasn't in the tent to expound on how stupid he was.

And it was stupid, plain and simple. How could he have been so idiotic? How could he have let this happen? He had played directly into Voldemort's hands and now he really was helpless.

He looked around at his loyal Gryffindors who sat patiently in Voldemort's office as if this was just another lesson. They looked at

him as if expecting him to simply explain how he would defeat Voldemort in this situation.

Voldemort settled into the chair behind his huge desk. He looked up at Harry. "No comment, Harry?"

"What are they doing here?" Harry asked, indicating the students.

Voldemort smiled. "They are here because I wish them here," he simply said. "They have aided me greatly and shall be rewarded. They will become a part of my new world order."

Sean shot to his feet. "I'll never join you," he said full of righteous indignation.

"Oh do sit down, Mr. McIves," said Voldemort. "Your melodrama is lost on me."

"But—"

Cindy yanked on his arm until he returned to his place on the sofa beside her.

Harry tried to ignore them. "And just what is this new world order?"

"I intend to take the wizarding world out of the shadows," said Voldemort. "My plans remain as they always have."

"You can't simply go around killing anyone who doesn't agree with you," said Sean.

Harry blinked at him. Boy did *that* sound familiar.

Voldemort chuckled. "Of course I can, my boy," said Voldemort. "That is who I am." He looked back at Harry. "And now that I finally have your cooperation..." he trailed off not needing to elucidate. "Oh Harry, don't look so crestfallen. I would have very much preferred to have you by my side in the traditional way. But we tried that, didn't we? You couldn't seem to get around the prophecy. Your noble nature kept getting in the way."

"You must see that this way is better," Voldemort went on. "You won't be sacrificing yourself anymore."

"So what?" snapped Harry. "I'm only here for your amusement now? Why didn't you just let me die?"

"Harry don't you understand yet?" said Voldemort, somehow retaining a hold on his patience. "The connection is still at full strength. If one of us dies, so does the other."

"Yeah, I get it, but what do I do now?" Harry's bitterness was creeping up on him again.

"Ah that's the sweet part," said Voldemort. "You can only do what I tell you to do. You are finally truly under my control."

"Why can't Professor Potter do anything?"

The two looked back at the students, recalling their presence.

"Quite simply, Miss Larsen, because he didn't die," Voldemort explained. "He does not know deaths' secrets therefore the basic abilities that are inherent to ghosts haven't been made known to him."

"So you've made him helpless," squeaked Missy.

Voldemort rose from his chair. He grinned unrepentantly. "Precisely." He moved toward the entrance. "I must see to my Death Eaters. Most should be assembled now," he murmured. "When I return I will have jobs for the three of you." He eyed Harry. "Behave Harry."

"Do I have a choice?" Harry snarled back.

Voldemort chuckled. "Not remotely," he said and left the tent.

Harry took several deep breaths (what seemed like it anyway, being in ghost form he wasn't sure) to reign his anger. Losing his temper would do nothing. He couldn't do anything anyway.

As soon as Voldemort had left the tent, the children were on their feet.

"So what do we do?"

"We can fix this, can't we?"

"There must be a way."

"Just do what he says," said Harry. "You can't discount his malignancy. You can see where his 20 year obsession has left me. He *will* kill for his purposes."

"But there has to be a way to help you," said Missy.

"Yes," Sean agreed. "The Amulet was the key. We can--"

"In case you didn't notice," said Cindy. "The Amulet is around Voldemort's neck."

"Yes but--"

"Sean," said Harry gravely. "The spells used to activate the Amulet were two sided. We would both have to do them again to reverse this – this – the effect."

"But there must be something we can do."

Harry?

"I agree--"

"Shh," said Harry. *Draco?*

Yes. Where are you?

*In Voldemort's tent. Where are you?
I'll be right there.*

"What is it, Professor?" said Cindy.

"Mr. Malfoy is here," said Harry.

"Oh, he'll know what to do," said Sean. "He's the one who figured it out first."

"I beg your pardon," sniffed Cindy. "I figured it out."

“You only speculated,” said Sean. “He had-“

“Harry!” Draco immersed into the tent, breathless.

“What’s going on out there?” said Harry.

“The aurors are coming,” said Draco, taking in the occupants of the tent.

“What?” said Sean. “Already?”

Harry blinked, surprised himself. “How?”

“They were tipped off by a large surge of Dark magic,” Draco explained.

“That makes sense,” said Cindy. “The Ministry has sensors. They would have picked up on it. You should have seen the power he used to recreate this compound.”

Sean and Missy muttered their agreement.

“So what’s he doing?” Harry asked Draco.

Draco sighed. “Well obviously, he’s preparing the defenses but,” he swallowed. “Harry, they don’t stand a chance.”

“What do you mean?”

Draco glanced at Cindy. “Well the girl is right. He’s got all the power – all *your* power,” said Draco. “They’ll get through the initial barriers. When they attack him, and he retaliates...”

“Oh God,” murmured Harry. *It’ll be a blood bath.*

“You’ve got to stop him.”

Harry glared at Draco. “How?” he demanded. “I can’t even move unless he calls or tells me too. How am I going to stop him?”

“Granger – er – Hermione did some research,” said Draco. “She said you have to use your mind. You can’t just take a step.”

“But I can move my arms and bend my legs,” said Harry.

Draco nodded. “But to propel yourself from one location to another, you have to use your mind.”

“How?” said Harry angrily.

“Well damn it Harry, you’re the most powerful wizard in-“

“WAS, Draco,” he growled back. “Was.”

“Use what’s left of your meager intelligence,” Draco shouted. “You can’t just give up. You have to find a way. Hermione said you could use your mind to displace your mass from one space to another. If bloody Peeves can do it-“

“Sounds like apparating.”

Everyone turned to the door.

“Manelin, what are you doing here?” said Sean.

“Stupid question, McIves,” snorted Dante. “He’s taken a lot of us from school.”

Oh God. He’s taking the children.

So do something, Potter.

Great. More guilt.

“Wait, he’s right,” Missy piped up. “It does sound like apparating.” She turned to Harry. “Maybe you could try that.”

It was worth a shot. Harry focused on Voldemort and tried to apparate. His life certainly was a nightmare again. But nothing happened.

“I don’t think it’s exactly the same,” said Draco. “And you should try small first. Just try moving toward me. Just relax and focus on moving toward me.”

“Concentrate, Harry,” said Voldemort.

"I'm trying."

"I told you to relax," said Voldemort. Harry felt him stop in front of him. Far too close as the pain in his head could attest. "Focus."

Harry opened his eyes and stared into Voldemort's burning red eyes. His temper snapped. "How can I concentrate with you hovering over me. I can't even think-"

"You did it!"

Harry's attention snapped back to the present. Draco was right in front of him.

"What did you do?" said Sean curiously.

Harry looked around. He *had* moved clear across the office.

"It was a memory," said Harry softly.

"Maybe that's the trick," said Draco. "You've used your memories before to jump start your internal magic."

His internal magic? Was that what allowed ghosts in the magical world to linger? Some sort of desperate hold on life through ones internal magic? Harry didn't even want to speculate on-

"Harry, try it again," Draco interrupted his thoughts.

Accessing his internal magic had become second nature for him, but when he reached for them this time, he felt nothing.

Harry shook his head. "Nothing."

Draco was pacing again.

"Well, what was the memory?" Dante asked with interest.

Harry glanced at him. "It was when Voldemort first taught me to apparate," said Harry. "I lost my temper."

"Well there you go," said Cindy. "You need the emotion as well."

“So, what then?” snapped Harry. “I can’t move unless I’m pissed off.”

But it worked. Harry moved toward Cindy as he spoke.

Cindy looked a little flustered. “Well any emotion I image would work,” she said. “But if anger is readily accessible, then why not use it.”

“Sorry,” muttered Harry. The temper he had worked so hard to control seemed to be getting the best of him again.

“She’s right, Harry,” said Draco. “If anyone deserves to be angry right now, it’s you. Use it.”

It didn’t seem quite right but Harry couldn’t fault the logic. Clinging to his anger and resentment, he was able to move freely around the office, pacing like the caged animal he felt like.

“Alright, so I can move now,” said Harry. “What do I do?”

“First-“ Draco clutched his left arm. He looked up at Harry. “It’s begun,” he said.

An explosion resounded through the compound, shaking the walls.

“He’s calling me,” said Draco. “I have to go. Stop him, Harry.”

“How?”

Draco moved towards the door. “Just talk to him.”

Harry watched him leave. But how was he supposed to talk to Voldemort when he didn’t know where he was? The choice was taken from him as pain exploded in his scar.

Harry clutched his head and felt himself pulled into the vortex.

He didn’t even get a chance to hit his knees. Voldemort pulled him up, an arm around his chest. The pain was almost unbearable.

“Take a good look, Harry,” said Voldemort in his ear. “Those fools think to curtail me before I get organized. They have no idea what they’re up against.” He chuckled. “My Death Eaters could have taken

care of this paltry assault themselves, but I simply had to be a part of it.”

Voldemort released him and took a step back. Harry reached for his internal magic to block the pain so he could see the results of the first attempt to subdue the Dark Lord.

Using his internal magic worked. Harry wished it hadn't as he viewed the destruction before him.

Bodies sprinkled the field as Death Eaters wandered among them, checking for life or putting out fires. The smell of blood and charred flesh hung in the air. The smell of death.

Harry hit his knees then. *What have I done?*

The ripples of lingering magic clung to debris and smoke. Even nature itself couldn't disperse the power that had been released in the area.

“Come along, Harry,” said Voldemort as he spun away and strode back into the forest. “News of my first victory should be reaching Albus by now. It is time to prepare.”

Harry felt himself physically towed back to the interior of the compound. Evidence of celebration was apparent all around them. Voldemort encouraged them as he moved among his faithful minions, praising their efficiency and promising them power and notoriety.

Harry wished he could be sick. Most of them were still dirty and tattered from the battle, but their jubilation overshadowed their fatigue.

Just how did all these people escape retribution? And where the hell was Draco? And Lucius? And Sever-

Oh God. Snape was dead. The memory hit Harry hard as it sank in. Another personal loss for Harry. While their relationship in the later years of Harry's academic career was obscure, ranging from teacher to personal physician, Harry now considered Severus a colleague, a friend. It would be a major loss for the wizarding world as well. Snape

was a brilliant Potions Master and a powerful wizard. Voldemort would surely...

Harry didn't get that one. Snape was one of Voldemort's most powerful Death Eaters, even if he had been a spy. It had never bothered Voldemort before. Why would he kill him?

"You killed Snape," muttered Harry.

"Indeed."

"Why?"

Voldemort stopped and turned to face Harry. "Why do you think?"

Harry frustration was palpable. "Can't you just tell me?" he snapped.

Voldemort grabbed his jaw. "Temper, temper, Harry," Voldemort said, shaking his head.

Shaking with pain, Harry clenched his teeth. "You said you didn't need him anymore."

"Very good, Harry," said Voldemort. "Why?"

"You said since you could control me now."

"Yes. You can't be physically hurt now, so..." he trailed off suggestively.

"But--"

"And you favored him far too much," Voldemort continued. He released Harry's face and continued walking.

"Are you saying, you killed him because he was my friend?" Harry demanded.

"In a manner of speaking."

“So who’s next?” said Harry, his ire fueling his resentment. “Ron? Hermione? Drac-“ He stopped himself, realization gripping him. “Where’s Lucius?” he asked softly.

Voldemort chuckled. “Oh Harry. How you do go on.”

Anyone even coming close to any sort of father-figure for Harry had always angered Voldemort. “Where is he?” said Harry.

Voldemort sighed. “He is still at the Retreat,” he said flatly.

“The Retreat?” said Harry, confused. “Didn’t you call him?”

Silence.

“Is he dead?”

“Come along, Harry.”

“Voldemort.”

Voldemort stopped again and Harry saw contemplation cross his expression. Finally, he looked at Harry and grinned, in a proudly evil sort of way. “Let’s just say, Lucius continues to enjoy good health,” said Voldemort. “For now.”

“What-“

Voldemort waved his hand and began walking again. “That’s enough talk of Lucius. He is alive. If you wish him to remain that way, then you will desist pestering me about him.”

So they were back to that. Threatening people he cared about. Would Voldemort carry through with his threats this time? But Harry could only do what Voldemort told him to do. How could he do something wrong? Confused again, Harry remained quiet.

They re-entered the tent and Harry was surprised to see it empty. Alarmed he asked, “Where are the kids?”

Voldemort fixed himself a drink and settled into his chair. "Relax Harry, they are fine. I have just isolated them until I can insure their cooperation."

Harry nodded. "And what about my family?" he asked carefully.

Swirling his drink, Voldemort grinned. "After taking so much care with securing the heirs, do you think I would hurt them?"

Harry really didn't think so. "Ginger?"

"Your lovely wife is a mother first now," Voldemort reminded him. "Her job is to care for her children, which she will do."

"And Sirius?"

"Sirius is here, of course."

Harry gaze snapped up. "He is?"

"Of course," said Voldemort. "He has sworn himself to me, for your sake. He takes his obligation to you very seriously. And he will now protect me as fiercely as he has protected you."

"What?" said Harry. Sirius? Protect Voldemort. "I don't believe you."

Voldemort chuckled. "Harry, why would I lie, when the truth is so much more satisfying?"

"But—"

"Your godfather is a very intelligent man," said Voldemort. "He realizes that if I die, you will go with me."

"Hence, his protection," said Harry with understanding.

"Indeed. As long as there is a chance that they can bring you back, he will insure that we are both around to try."

"And is there a chance?" said Harry.

"What do you think?"

Harry didn't think there was a chance in hell but he guessed he *should* remain hopeful.

"Master?" A voice rose from the door of the office.

"Ah, come in. Come in."

"What are you doing now?" said Harry.

"Just waiting for a suitable messenger," said Voldemort as he stood up.

Harry didn't have a chance to prod as several Death Eaters entered half dragging half supporting three wizards in varying degrees of physical health between them. They were clearly robed as Aurors.

Harry didn't recognize the first one who was presented to Voldemort. Voldemort waved him away.

"No, no. Not him."

The second looked almost as old as Voldemort himself. Voldemort dismissed him as well. The last was dragged closer. Struggling for consciousness, the man raised his head. The hood was pulled down to reveal a shock of red hair and the bloody face of Ron Weasley.

"Voldemort – what – how-"

Voldemort smiled with delight. "How nice to see that the Minister of Magic would allow his own family to participate in the fight against evil."

"I *am* the Head of the Department of Defense," said Ron, trying to pull his arms free.

"Ron."

Dulled blue eyes were turned to Harry and squinted to focus. "Harry?"

Ron's gaze went back and forth from Voldemort to Harry, his jaw moving silently. Then he speared Voldemort with a fierce look.

"What have you done?"

"I have taken back the life I saved, Ron. For myself," said Voldemort.

"What-"

With a wave of Voldemort's hand, Ron was silenced.

"You will take a message back to the Ministry and to Albus," said Voldemort, pacing thoughtfully. "You will tell them that they should surrender with no resistance."

"Are you-"

"Or I *will* start killing. It's quite simple Mr. Weasley. They will yield or they will die. They do not have Harry to sacrifice himself for them anymore."

"Voldemort-"

"Be quiet Harry."

Harry's jaw was left open as the words died in his throat.

"As you can see, he is completely under my control," Voldemort told Ron with a self-satisfied grin. "Take him away."

Harry watched in forced submission as Ron was dragged back out of the tent. Before more guilt and remorse could settle over Harry, Voldemort was before him. He gripped Harry's jaw roughly, holding his face up.

"Ah, Harry, my pet," said Voldemort quietly. His other hand raised and a finger slowly trailed up Harry's face, flesh meeting flesh as the connection was intensified. "I am indeed pleased."

Harry closed his eyes and swallowed. The physical pain not nearly as strong as the emotional anguish.

"Let go of your guilt, my son." Harry opened his eyes and met the red gaze. "You have done all you could. Everything that was expected of you and more."

Harry reached up and clutched at Voldemort's wrist. If he could speak, he knew he'd be begging.

Voldemort sighed heavily and let go. Harry collapsed to a heap at his feet. "This is your destiny now, Harry," Voldemort said. "You're mine."

Chapter 22

The Love of a Phoenix

“Harry?”

Harry opened his eyes. Draco stood at the entrance of the tent, a worried frown stretched across his face. He moved further into the office and approached the chair Harry was sitting in, or rather occupying. It was a large wing-backed chair that should have been quite comfortable. Harry didn't feel comfortable. He felt very little – nothing actually.

He gazed up at Draco. “He's insane,” he said softly.

Draco nodded. “Not something we didn't know.”

“Is Ron all right?”

Draco nodded again. “He made it back to the Ministry.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“What is Dumbledore going to do?”

Draco sighed. “Unknown,” he said. “The aurors have regrouped and convened.”

Harry snorted. It was an ugly sound even to his own ears. “Fools,” he murmured. “Nothing can stop him now.” He met Draco's eyes again. “Nothing.”

“Harry-“

“Except you,” said Harry.

Draco blinked. “Me?”

Harry nodded and straightened. “I've been thinking.”

“Oh no.”

“You have to kill him.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“Draco, I can’t be a ghost,” Harry said. “I can’t simply exist like this. I can’t touch my wife or hold my children. I can’t fly anymore or fence.” His feelings of frustration and helplessness compelled him up. He moved closer to Draco. “I can’t sit back and simply watch life go on. I’d rather be dead. You have to kill him.”

“But you’ll die too.”

“I don’t care,” Harry insisted. He had made up his mind. This was the only way to stop Voldemort and free himself. “He gave me an additional eight years with his ‘noble gesture.’ I should be dead anyway. Don’t you see? The heirs are born, I don’t have to live anymore. Especially like this. I can’t – I won’t.”

“Harry, I don’t have the power to kill him.”

Harry’s frustration grew, allowing him the natural ability to pace. “All you have to do is get close to him. Shoot him. Stab him. Strangle him. It doesn’t matter how. You don’t need magic, in fact, you *can’t* use magic. You must know a muggle way to kill someone. Poison him if you have to.”

Draco stared at the floor. “I-I can’t.”

“Damn it, Draco. Why not?”

“I-I won’t be responsible for your death.”

Harry couldn’t help his irritated growl. “The longer he lives, the more people will die. That’s my fault, I know, but I can’t do anything about it now. You have to do it.”

“He really doesn’t trust me that much,” Draco pointed out. But it sounded to Harry as if he were just grasping for excuses.

Maybe it was too much to expect of Draco.

“What about your father then? He owes me. Maybe he’ll do it.”

“My father is still in Bulgaria,” Draco said. “You know he’s dead if he leaves the house.”

Harry figured as much, but Voldemort could still... He lifted his gaze. “What do you mean if he leaves the house?”

“I mean that Voldemort tried to get in, to get to my father,” Draco told him. “To see why he didn’t come when the Death Eaters were called. Or so he says.”

“And?” prompted Harry.

“And he couldn’t get in.”

“It was *his* bloody house,” said Harry. “What do you mean he couldn’t get in?”

“He couldn’t get through your wards.” Draco actually smirked.

Harry blinked.

“What ever you did, the Dark Lord couldn’t figure them out,” said Draco. “And he didn’t have the power to simply blast through them.”

Harry continued to blink. I hadn’t been that complicated. Privacy and protection spells although it was one of the few times he had used his wand to do magic.

“He was furious at first,” Draco went on. “But then he seemed inordinately pleased – proud even.”

Harry couldn’t help his smirk. “I’ll bet.”

“Ah Harry, my pet,” Voldemort declared as he entered his office. His pleasant expression was replaced by outrage when he noticed Draco. He lifted his hand. “*Crucio.*”

“Voldemort, stop,” Harry begged.

Voldemort held the curse for a few moments before lifting it. He moved to stand over Draco's writhing, panting form. "Mr. Malfoy," said Voldemort. "I thought I told you that I did not want you in here without my consent."

"Voldemort-"

"I'm sorry, my lord," Draco choked out. "I just wanted to-"

"*Crucio.*" Voldemort circled the thrashing body. "You knew my wishes. You heard my direct commands yet you disregarded them."

"I-I'm sorry."

"*Crucio.*"

Harry watched helplessly as Voldemort tortured Draco. His heart felt like it would burst out of his chest and he couldn't seem to catch his breath.

"Voldemort," he pleaded.

"Now go," Voldemort told Draco. "And do not disobey me again."

Harry couldn't even help as Draco struggled to his feet and staggered out of the tent with a quiet, "Yes, my lord."

Only then did Voldemort turn his attention back to Harry. Voldemort gripped his chin and turned his face to view. "He knows better than to displease me," said Voldemort, his eyes moving over Harry's pained expression. "They all do."

Voldemort let go and moved away. Harry pressed his palm to his scar watching Voldemort closely. The pleasant expression was back.

"My order is finally coming together," he announced.

"Dumbledore conceded?" said Harry, unsure if he really wanted to hear.

Voldemort sent him a glance. "Good heavens no. Dumbledore would never openly concede to me." He chuckled. "We have the Ministry

though. Ron was an excellent messenger. With his testimony and a little help from several of my 'friends' in place at the Ministry, it was taken with very little difficulty."

Harry wondered how much death was involved in 'very little difficulty.' "Feel free to gloat," Harry muttered unable to stop himself.

Voldemort chuckled. "Always the cynic, my Harry."

"So what's next?" said Harry. "You've covered murder and mayhem. Chaos and anarchy would be moot."

"Oh Harry, calm yourself," said Voldemort. "This is the beginning of a whole new world. A better world. My world."

"What makes you think it will be better?"

"It will be better, because it will be mine." He shot Harry another look. "Just like you, Harry. And like you, the world will be--"

"You're crazy if you think everyone will simply--"

"The change in the government won't even effect most people, Harry. They will go on living their mundane little lives. The only change will be that I am the one who runs it."

"And if someone doesn't conform?" Harry challenged. "Someone disobeys?"

Voldemort waved it off. "A small price to pay," he said.

"To live in fear?" Harry was incredulous.

"You have nothing to fear anymore, Harry."

"I'm not talking about me," Harry snapped. "My life is over. You saw to that."

"You're wrong, Harry," Voldemort said seriously. "You are still very consequential to the lives of many. You just can't do anything about it."

Everything came crushing in on Harry. All the deaths. His fault. He could only watch helplessly as Voldemort brought down everyone in his way. Just as he did the first time.

And Harry could do nothing, but watch and listen to the screams. Just as he'd watched Draco scream. Voldemort was controlling all the people Harry cared about. And he could control Harry. And Harry could do *nothing*.

Total helplessness. That trap door that had followed him around since he was 15, always lurking, waiting to swallow him whole, opened, entrenching him in more guilt.

And anger. God such anger.

Harry wished he could wrap his hand around-

Harry's brain locked up on the thought and he launched his form at Voldemort, his hands becoming substance at contact. Emotions tore through him. His anger became hate.

Voldemort flew back onto the floor at the impact, and Harry's hands tightened around his throat.

"I won't be helpless anymore," Harry seethed, squeezing with all his might.

Red eyes grew wide. Voldemort couldn't 'talk' his way out of this now.

Harry's rage drove him on. He was vaguely aware of the pain racking through his body like currents of fire but he ignored it. His sole intent to squash the evil that had plagued him for so long.

And it was evil. Only something so vile would have gone through such extremes, such deliberate cruelty. And it was cruel, because he had made Harry care.

Betrayal twisted like a knife in his heart.

Harry had believed him. Every damn thing Voldemort told him, Harry trustingly believed. Harry had wanted to believe, needed to believe.

Not anymore. Harry was taking control of his life finally – even if it killed him. And he was sure this time, it would.

But damn it, he was taking Voldemort with him – for good.

Voldemort's face started to blur – no – fade. Harry could feel strangled reverberations of screams under his fingers as he clutched the throat. Bones cracked under pressure, muscles tore.

Harry gasped for breath. His hands trembled as his knuckles turned white.

Then there was no air left in his lungs. Darkness clouded around him like a heavy blanket. The substance in his grasp became soft, spongy.

Then there was nothing.

Harry groaned or at least made some semblance of sound in response to the pain his body was currently experiencing. He found it odd that even in death, pain was to be his constant companion.

“Problem, Potter?”

Forcing one eye to open, he focused on the face hovering over him. Snape? He blinked in surprise, but should have realized that for everything he'd done, he'd be damned.

“Surprised to see me?”

Harry wondered how much it would hurt to speak.

“A little,” Harry managed without too much pain. As long as he didn't move too much, it seemed to be tolerable. “You redeemed yourself. I thought you'd be spared.”

Snape looked at him, clearly puzzled. “Spared?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “This *is* Hell, is it not?”

Snape snorted. “Ever observant,” he said in one of his more mildly derisive tones. “I presumed you'd recognize the Hogwarts infirmary by now.”

With tremendous effort, Harry turned his head to look around.

"I dare say, they'll be renaming a wing after you."

"But," Harry returned his gaze to Severus. "But."

"And as eloquent as ever as well," said Snape.

"Damn it, Snape," snapped Harry and was instantly sorry. Once he had a firm grip on the pain, he turned a glare back to Severus. "Just tell me, please." He swallowed. "I saw you die." Harry couldn't help his voice from choking slightly.

"Yes, but you had already been sucked away by Voldemort when the old coot called Fawkes and 'ordered' him to save me," said Severus.

Harry blinked. "And what saved me?"

"The love of a phoenix is a treasure in itself," Severus explained.

"Rowan?" Harry choked.

"Indeed. She sacrificed herself."

"But." Harry swallowed, fighting to get the words out. "How?"

"Honestly, Potter, how long had you had that bird?" Severus sighed and sat down on the bed beside him. "As soon as your body became substance again, she was able to find you."

"But I didn't call her."

Severus nodded gravely. "She could hear your silent cries of agony, Harry."

Harry blinked back tears that pooled in his eyes. Rowan? He didn't want anyone else to die for him.

"Draco said it was quite a show."

Harry refocused on Severus and lifted his brows expectantly.

“As you know, a phoenix flying at peak is a magnificent sight.”

Harry nodded.

“A sight such as that did not go unnoticed by those in the compound. Draco informed me that as soon as the Death Eaters noticed you back in corporeal form and the Dark Lord nowhere to be found, they fled.

“Gone?”

Severus nodded. “Whether Rowan banished him in ghost form or he no longer exists in any form is a mystery.”

“Was I dead?”

“Oh you were indeed,” said Snape. “Draco, as well as your little Gryffindors can now verify that they have seen a very pissed off phoenix.”

“Then he is gone,” Harry managed. If they were both dead, then there couldn’t be a way for Voldemort to still exist. “Tell me-“

Snape’s further explanation was cut off by a commotion at the door.

“You have to let us in.”

“Madam Pomfrey, please-“

“We were there. We have to see Professor Potter.”

“Now see here.”

“Get out of my way.”

“Mr. Malfoy, really. Come back here.”

Snape stood up as another figure, unmistakably Draco, drew next to Harry’s bed. Harry was still having a hard time focusing but he couldn’t miss the crowd that gathered around his bed.

Harry closed his eyes. He *really* wasn’t up to this.

“God it was so cool.”

“Amazing.”

“Bloody brilliant.”

“At least there wasn’t any blood this time.”

Harry opened his eyes after that last one. He met Draco’s gaze.

“Was it tragic enough?” croaked Harry.

Draco smirked. “Actually it was rather spectacular,” he said mildly.
“On the phoenix’ part.”

Harry nodded.

“So what happened before your bird came to your rescue?” Draco asked.

Harry closed his eyes and swallowed. “I lost my temper,” he said.

“Talk about tempers,” said Sean. “Rowan lost hers as well.”

She picked you. She is like you.

Harry could only nod.

“By the time we came in,” Draco told him, “she was already tearing the office apart. Most of it was on fire.”

“And she was making the saddest noises,” said Cindy.

“Mr. Malfoy tried to go to you, to see if you were breathing but Rowan wouldn’t let him,” said Missy.

“And she was crying and screeching.”

Draco cleared his throat. “She finally landed on your chest and laid down on top of you with her wings fully opened.”

“Then the light show started,” said Sean.

The other two nodded. Harry lifted his gaze again to Draco and raised a brow.

"Well she started glowing," said Draco hesitantly. "First her own sapphire and silver colors and then it became more random, covering all the specters. And the air around you and her misted over."

"It was like watching the aurora borealis," said Cindy softly.

Missy nodded exuberantly.

"Then she turned all red and finally burst into real flames the way a phoenix does when it renews itself," Draco continued. "And when the pile of ashes settled on your chest, you sucked in a deep breath and well, nothing came out of the ashes." Draco looked away. "I'm truly sorry, Harry."

Harry nodded his thanks. He wasn't sure how he felt. Rowan had been a part of his life since he was fifteen. She had always been there to scold him, to comfort him, to ease his pain.

"You were *her* wizard, Harry," said Draco as if following his thoughts. "It was her job to take care of you."

Harry looked up at him and noticed the others had been ushered out. He nodded.

Draco sat down on the edge of the bed beside him and peered around. "Before I get kicked out," he said softly. "I know Ginny and her family are waiting to get in here now that they are here and you're awake." He pulled a small parcel from his robe, keeping it between them so only they could see. "What do you want to do with this?"

As Draco unwrapped the cloth, it was obviously a large chain with-

"The talisman," Harry said softly.

Draco nodded. "It was laying on the floor beside you," he said. "I picked it up before anyone noticed it." He laid it in Harry's hand. "I tested it for magic but it doesn't seem to-"

He cut himself off as the eyes of the engraved phoenix started to glow.

“But then again,” said Draco with a snort. “I’m not an heir.”

“Take it Draco,” rasped Harry and Draco pulled it out of his hand and quickly wrapped it up again. “You take it. Turn it over to that museum and get credit for finding the Amulet.”

Draco shook his head. “It’s yours, Harry,” he said. “You should-“

“It’s a curse, Draco. It’s safer in a museum. No one but an heir can use it, so it will be safe.”

Draco sighed and stuffed it into his pocket. He looked as if he wanted to argue more about it, but a tirade of voices rose from the door.

“Harry! Oh, Harry!”

Draco moved away from the bed as Ginger and Ron and Hermione descended on Harry.

Epilogue

Approximately 11 years later

Harry looked up at the sound of scuffling feet. Several 1st years came skidding to a halt in front of his desk. He surveyed the panting delinquents, all donned in green robes. The starting feast was long over and all three of the Slytherins should be tucked safely in bed down in the dungeons. He’d have to have several words with the head of their house for letting them ‘escape.’

A small smile graced his face at the thought of taking Severus to task for not being able to control the students in his own house. But then Severus would take great satisfaction in reminding Harry that said ‘escaped Slytherin’ was a Potter and everyone knew how Potters felt about rule-breaking. Severus tended to turn a blind eye on all his Slytherins, even Harry’s daughter. Of course, to even out the field, Harry had given his son the Invisibly cloak.

Harry sighed.

"Taylor, what are you doing up here?" said Harry, trying to mask his amusement with exasperation.

"Daddy, look," Taylor Lily Potter practically squealed as she opened her robe and pulled out a rather ugly looking bird. "Isn't he cute?"

Harry eyed the half-dead looking bird until-

"Joanie says it's a phoenix," Taylor went on breathlessly. Said Slytherin cohort nodded enthusiastically. "Have you ever seen one?"

Harry could only stare at it. "Where did you get it?" said Harry, almost afraid to hear.

"Oh, it was so cool," the third wandering Slytherin girl announced. "It flew into the dorm, landed on Taye's bed and burst into flames."

"Then it started singing," Joanie went on.

Harry's eyes were now riveted on his daughter who was stroking the little fur ball lovingly.

"And," prompted Harry.

Taylor looked up and her deliriously excited green eyes met his.

"Oh, Daddy," said Taylor breathlessly. "He said his name is Marvolo and I am his witch."

Harry's jaw went slack. "Marvolo?" choked Harry.

"What is going on in here?" said Snape from the door. "You three should be in bed. Let's go. Off with you now."

Harry vaguely felt lips press his cheek.

"Night, Daddy."

The three girls noisily left his office, chattering about Taylor being adopted by a phoenix.

Harry stared after them. Taylor's long black braid swinging down her back.

"Problem, Potter?"

Harry slowly lifted his gaze to Severus'.

"A phoenix just adopted my daughter," said Harry softly.

Snape leaned against the corner of Harry desk. "So," said Severus. "Shouldn't surprise you."

"Severus, a *phoenix* named *Marvolo* just adopted *my Slytherin* daughter," said Harry.

Snape blinked at him.

Harry lowered his head to the desk, slowly banging his forehead on the surface.

"Harry, I'm sure it's a coincidence."

Harry looked up. "Severus, what in *my* life has *ever* been a coincidence?"

Severus sighed. "Look," he said. "Even if it is in anyway shape or form, some manifestation of Voldemort, he can't hurt anyone – not even you. It isn't in the nature of a phoenix."

"Maybe," muttered Harry. "But why do I feel a nightmare coming on?"

The End

End note: This is really 'the end.' Unless I get hit with a serious plot muse, they're won't be any more to this plot line. Hope you enjoyed it.